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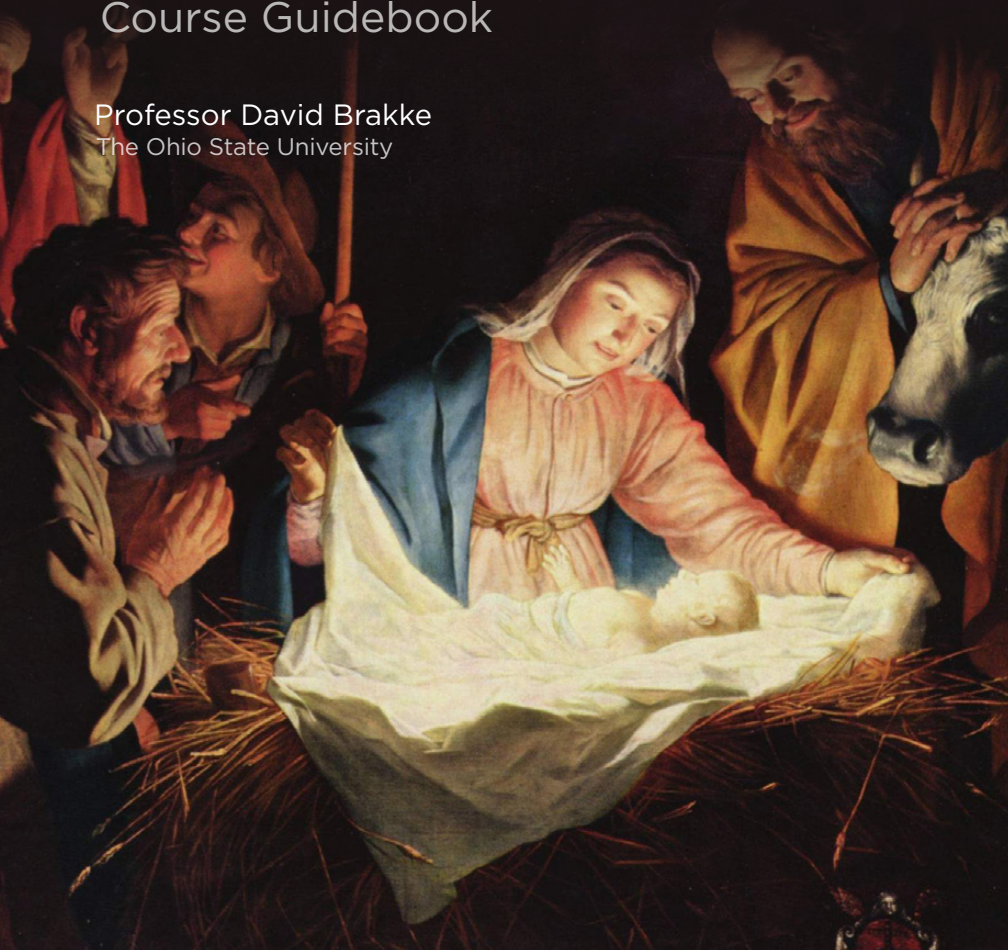
Course Guidebook

Professor David Brakke
The Ohio State University



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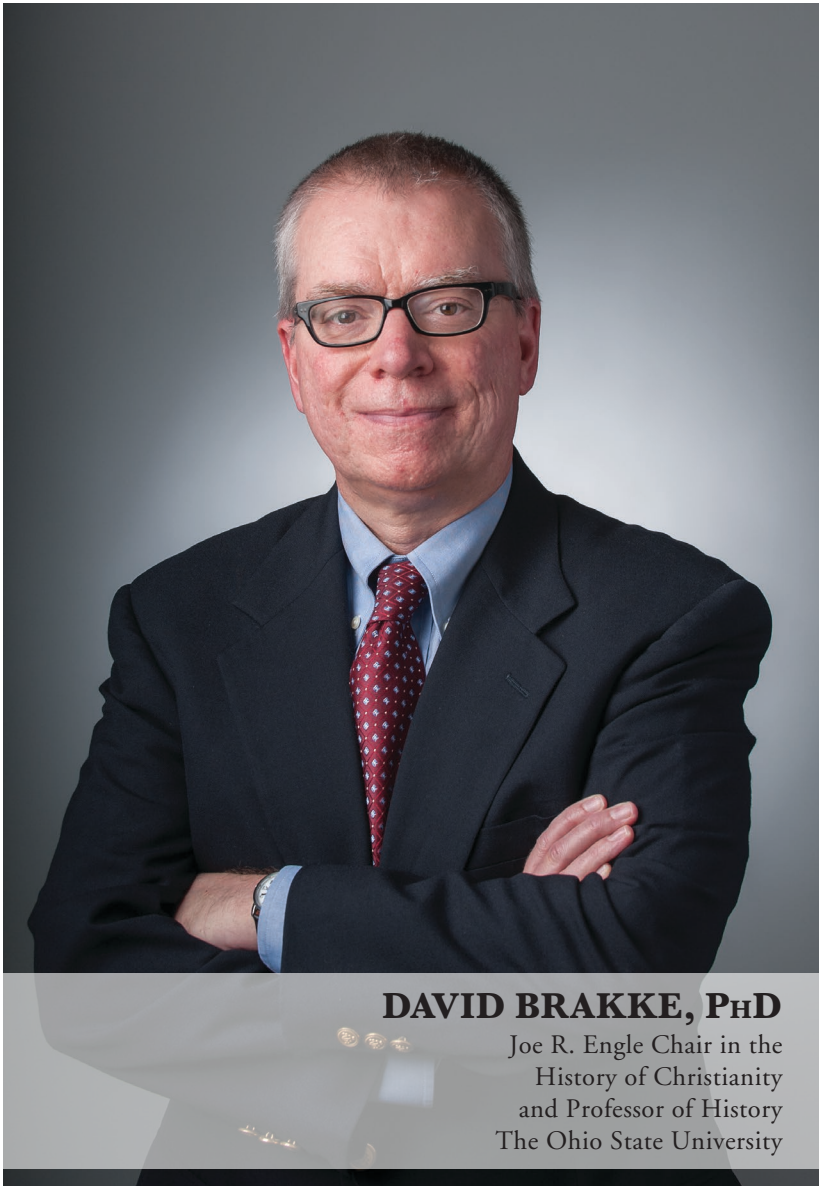

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Professor Brakke's other Great Courses are *Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas* and *The Apocryphal Jesus*.

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UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is something of a paradox. On the one hand, it is a single book—or part of a book, the Christian Bible. As such, Christians believe that it communicates a single religious message. On the other hand, it is a collection of 27 different books, written by probably 16 different authors at various times and places. This paradox expresses itself in a variety of ways. For example, the New Testament teaches that salvation comes through Jesus, but its individual books present differing pictures of who Jesus was and what he taught. This course investigates the diversity of the New Testament by studying the distinct perspectives of its individual writings in their historical contexts.

First, you'll consider the origin of the New Testament as a single collection in the 4th century and the origin of Christianity in the Judaism of the 1st century. Jewish beliefs about the coming kingdom of God gave birth to faith in Jesus as God's "anointed one," the Messiah or Christ who would bring that kingdom.

The course then turns to the earliest Christian writings: the letters of Paul, written in the 50s. Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans show how his greatest theological teaching, that salvation comes solely through faith in Jesus, arose during a controversy over the inclusion of Gentiles—non-Jews—among the believers. His correspondence with the Corinthians offers insight into the earliest Christian congregations, including their worship life, leadership roles, and internal conflicts. You'll study how Paul used passages from the Old Testament to identify Jesus as divine and how disciples of Paul adapted his message to new circumstances after his death.

You'll then explore the diverse portraits of Jesus in the gospels, composed from about 70 to the early 100s. In Mark, Jesus the suffering Son of Man provided an example of endurance and hope to Christians during a time of violence and uncertainty. Matthew's Jesus resembles Moses as the teacher of a new form of righteousness. In the sweeping history of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus represents the greatest in a line of prophets who have been sent by God to proclaim repentance and forgiveness. And John depicts a fully divine Jesus, the Word of God whom this world cannot fully understand. You'll then consider the problem of the historical Jesus: What did Jesus really say and do?

Finally, you'll study the remaining books of the New Testament, in which Christians struggle with the challenges and opportunities of a growing and maturing movement during the late 1st and early 2nd centuries. How should churches be organized and deal with conflict among one another? How should Christians relate to their pagan neighbors and the Roman Empire? These questions lead to Revelation's mysterious vision of the new Jerusalem of justice and peace, toward which God is leading history.

The course concludes by returning to the New Testament as a single book, with reflections on how ancient and modern Christians have found unity within its diversity. Study of the New Testament writings in their own historical contexts can not only fascinate believers and nonbelievers alike but also enhance the meanings that these sacred texts have for Christians in the contemporary world.

THE PARADOX OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament presents a paradox. On the one hand, it's a single book, one of two distinct parts of the Christian Bible, and as such, it has provided foundational authority for Christian thought and practice for centuries all over the world. On the other hand, it's 27 different books, reflecting the diverse views of some 16 early Christians who lived in different times and places. That paradox has presented challenges to Christian thinkers from the very moment that the New Testament was born—but it offers wonderful opportunities as well.

The Original List

- We can date the birth of the New Testament as we know it today to the year 367. In the winter of that year, the Christian bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, Athanasius, wrote a letter to his churches in which he discussed, among other things, the contents of the Christian Bible. The bishop was concerned that some Christian teachers were using books in their instruction that should not be considered part of the Bible. Therefore, he decided to list precisely which books belonged to what he called the canon—that is, the closed list of biblical books.

- Athanasius claimed that he had not invented this list—that he was just passing on what he had learned from his predecessors. And yet he also described what he was doing as "audacious." In fact, it was somewhat audacious because, although he was not the first Christian to list the books of the New Testament, none before him had claimed to present a list that was definitive and closed. Athanasius did. "In these books alone," he wrote, "the teaching of piety is proclaimed. Let no one add to or subtract from them."

- Athanasius listed the books of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament. And his list of New Testament books—for the first time in Christian history—contained precisely the 27 books that constitute the New Testament that Christians use today. In the decades that followed, Christian leaders and councils in other areas ratified lists of the New Testament that were identical to that of Athanasius. In this sense, it's correct to say that the New Testament came into being in the year 367.

- But the idea of a New Testament—the idea that Christians should supplement the books of the Jewish Bible with scriptures of their own—goes back to the late 100s, some 200 years before Athanasius's famous letter. And the books that Athanasius included in his New Testament

originated even earlier. Most of the works in the New Testament were written in the 1st century, before the year 100, and some as early as the 50s—more than 300 years before Athanasius's letter.

- That's the paradox. The New Testament as a single book, as a finished and complete collection, came into being in the late 300s—at a specific place and time, listed by a single man, Athanasius. But the individual books that make up that collection came into being at different places and times, ranging from the 50s of the 1st century to as late as the 120s, and they have multiple authors, probably around 16 different people. That can create some interpretive difficulties—as Athanasius himself clearly noticed.

Individual Differences

- If you read the New Testament carefully and thoughtfully, you'll come across some significant ways in which the individual writings differ from one another. For example, how does a person receive salvation? In his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, Paul stresses that a person is made righteous and thus worthy of salvation through faith in Christ alone, apart from the works of the Law. The Letter of James, on the other hand, insists that faith apart from works is barren; one must have faith and perform works.

- For Athanasius, and for many Christians in the centuries that followed him, the diversity of views found in the 27 New Testament books was a problem that needed to be solved. Athanasius, for example, interpreted certain texts in ways that harmonized them with one another. Other Christians have responded to the Bible's diversity by interpreting its texts to adhere to a single, overarching rule; by interpreting the Bible's contradictions allegorically; or by considering certain books more central to Christian theology than others.

- We needn't look at the diversity of the New Testament as a problem that needs to be solved. Instead, we can see it as an exciting entry into the diverse ideas of the early Christian communities that gave us the writings of the New Testament. Instead of homogenizing the New Testament writings into all saying the same thing, we can study each book on its own, let each author have his own voice, and try to reconstruct the beliefs and practices that each book reflects.

- The New Testament's 27 books come in several distinct genres or types of literature. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called gospels, referring to narratives of the ministry of Jesus that emphasize the final week of his life and his trial, death, and resurrection. Of these four, Luke is a special case: It's volume one of a two-volume work, the second half of which is the Acts of the Apostles. Acts narrates the expansion of the Christian movement after the resurrection of Jesus.

- Most of the remaining books are epistles—that is, letters addressed from a Christian leader to a congregation or another Christian leader. A couple of these, like the so-called Letter to the Hebrews, are not really letters. Hebrews appears to be a sermon, and the First Letter of John is something like an essay or short theological treatise. Nonetheless, thanks especially to the Apostle Paul, the most famous New Testament letter writer of all, it became typical for Christians to call many works letters even if they were not.

- The Book of Revelation is an apocalypse—which means a revelation or disclosure from a divine figure to a human being—in this case, a revelation from Jesus Christ to a Christian named John. As in most apocalypses, Jesus's revelation consists mostly of highly symbolic visions. It's interesting to notice, however, that Revelation begins with a set of letters from the risen Jesus to seven Christian congregations. In the New Testament, even Jesus writes letters—after his resurrection!

Textual Criticism

- None of the original copies of these works survive. We don't have, for example, the manuscript of the Letter to the Romans that Paul's secretary wrote as Paul dictated to him. Instead, these writings survive in nearly 6,000 manuscripts or manuscript fragments, the vast majority of which date to the 9th century or later. That is, what we have are copies of copies of copies, and so on. That makes the New Testament one of the best attested texts from the ancient world.

- Repeated copying, however, means that all these manuscripts have errors and other differences. In fact, no manuscript of the New Testament is precisely like any other in its wording. The number of such differences must be in the hundreds of thousands. Nearly all these differences are minor things that do not affect the meaning of the work, such as spelling errors or obviously accidental omissions of words. Some, however, are significant—that is, there are differences in wording that really do change the meaning of the text.

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- For example, the surviving manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark give that gospel three different endings. We believe that the shortest of these three endings is the original one, but translations of the New Testament usually give all three. Or consider the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, where you'll find the story of Jesus defending a woman accused of adultery. Our oldest manuscripts of the gospel do not have this story, and most scholars agree that it was not part of John as it was originally written. But you'll find it in your copy of the New Testament, maybe set in brackets to indicate its dubious character.

- Discrepancies on this scale make clear that ancient and medieval scribes didn't just make mistakes or inadvertently omit or add words; they sometimes deliberately changed the text. They wanted to make it better, or they thought they knew what the author really meant.

- The number of differences among the manuscripts is so great that there are biblical scholars who devote their entire careers to what's called textual criticism. Textual criticism studies the manuscripts of ancient works and tries to date them and to relate them to one another. Can we tell which manuscript was copied from which? Some manuscripts have dates that say when they were copied, but others must be dated by studying the handwriting or the kind of paper used. Textual critics seek to establish the original text—what the author himself actually wrote in the 1st or 2nd century.

Dating and Authorship

- Let's discuss how scholars date the individual writings of the New Testament and how they decide who wrote them. Critical historians study early Christian writings, including those in the New Testament, just as they do any other sources from the ancient world: They do not necessarily

accept the traditional attribution of a text and are open to the possibility that an author has composed his work in the name of another, more important person.

- In the case of the New Testament, this means that we do not start out by assuming that early Christian disciples named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the gospels that bear their names in the manuscripts. In fact, the texts of the gospels themselves do not claim the names of any particular person. The assignment of names to the gospels took place in the middle of the 2nd century as educated Christians tried to guess who might have written them.

- Likewise, when a letter in the New Testament claims to have been written by the Apostle James, historians will question that claim. James was known to have been the brother of Jesus, and thus he came from Nazareth in Galilee, and he is reported to have died during the Jewish War of 66 to 70. Does that fit the author of the Letter of James? Could it have been written by a Galilean Jew before the Jewish War? Most historians have answered these questions in the negative and thus concluded that it was not James the brother of Jesus who wrote the Letter of James.

- As you would expect, historians of early Christianity discuss and debate precisely when this or that New Testament writing should be dated and who might have written it. There's more certainty about some texts, like the genuine letters of Paul and the Gospel of Mark, than there is about others, like the Letters of James and Jude. But there's a broad consensus that the genuine letters of Paul come from around the 50s, that the gospels date from about 70 to about 100 or 110, that Revelation comes from the 90s, and that the remaining writings can be distributed through the decades running from the 70s to the 120s.

- As historians place each New Testament writing in its most likely historical context, they can understand better the diversity of perspectives that these writings contain. Each writing reflects the time at which it was

written, and it responds to the specific community and context for which it was written. When we situate each writing in its own time and context, we can better understand its distinct religious message.

- When Athanasius collected 27 different writings into a single book called the New Testament, he set Christian theology on a new path—one that he evidently hoped would lead to unity of belief. Sometimes he and other Christian theologians had to wrestle with the diversity of those writings, which they could see as inconsistent with that unity. But for the historian—and perhaps even for the modern Christian believer—that diversity can be illuminating, offering a way to explore the beliefs, practices, conflicts, and struggles of the very first Christians and thereby come to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, "A New Fragment of Athanasius's 39th *Festal Letter*."
———, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt."
Ehrman, *The New Testament*.

THE JEWISH ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

The first believers in Jesus claimed that God had raised from the dead Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified, and that Jesus was God's "anointed one"—God's Messiah or Christ—who would return soon to initiate the kingdom of God. These claims make sense only within the context of 1st-century Judaism and, as we shall see, only within a certain stream of Jewish tradition during that ancient period. Moreover, these beliefs about Jesus must have had their roots in the life and teachings of Jesus himself.

God's Covenants

- The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, establishes the relationship between the Jews and their God. That relationship is built on a series of covenants—agreements in which God makes certain promises and binds his people to himself. There are three key covenants that together created a set of expectations for how God and the Jewish people interacted: the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David.

- God's covenant with Abraham is found in Genesis, chapter 17. God has called Abram to leave his ancestral home and its gods and travel to Canaan and worship him. In this covenant, the Lord changes Abram's name to Abraham, and he promises Abraham three things—that Abraham's descendants will be numerous, symbolized by Abraham's new name; that he and his offspring shall possess the land of Canaan; and that he, the Lord, will be their god.

- This covenant comes with a sign: circumcision. Every male offspring of Abraham must be circumcised when he is eight days old. That includes men within the offspring of Abraham with whom God has made the covenant. Women are included by being attached to a circumcised male through birth or marriage. Any male descendant of Abraham who is not circumcised shall be cut off from his people.

- The subsequent history of Abraham's descendants is complicated, and eventually they end up enslaved in Egypt. God, however, keeps his promise to Abraham by bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt and back to the land he promised them. During that journey, God makes a new covenant with the people, who are led by Moses.

- God's covenant with Moses is found in Exodus, chapters 19 and 20. Here, God renews his promise that the people of Israel shall be his chosen people. He says that they shall be what he calls "a priestly kingdom and a

holy nation." How will they be made priestly and holy? By following the Torah or Law that God gives to Moses. The Ten Commandments form the heart of that Law, but the Law includes a wide range of statutes that separate God's people from the other nations of the world and make them sacred. The covenant's laws are inscribed on tablets that are kept in a portable container called the ark of the covenant.

- After the return of the people to Canaan, there is a series of armed conflicts in which the Israelites take possession of the land. After a period of leadership under charismatic figures called judges, the Israelites turn to a monarchy, first with King Saul and then with David. When David expresses interest in building a temple in Jerusalem as a permanent home for the ark of the covenant, God replies that, being God, he does not need a house. Instead, God will build David a house—that is, a royal dynasty.

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- God's covenant with David is found in 2 Samuel, chapter 7. God tells David that he, David, will not build his temple, but David's son will. God promises that the throne of David's progeny will last forever. "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me," God says. In short, a descendant of David will always reign as king in Jerusalem. The son of David may sin and go astray, and then God will punish him. But God promises, "I will not take my steadfast love from him."

- Putting these covenants together, we can see the distinctive characteristics of the relationship between the Jews and their God. God had made the offspring of Abraham his people and promised them the land of

Canaan—what becomes known as Palestine or Israel or, in parts, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Circumcision made men part of Abraham's offspring, and it was the sign of this covenantal bond. God's people were made holy through the Law that God gave through Moses, and God promised that a son of David would always rule as king in Jerusalem.

- But by the time Jesus was born, much of this was not true—at least not yet. The Jews did not control the land that God had promised them; the Romans did. In fact, most Jews did not live in the land of Israel, but were dispersed from Spain in the west to Persia in the east. A son of David did not reign as king in Jerusalem; Herod the Great, a Roman-authorized client king of dubious ancestry, reigned. By the time Jesus was an adult, there was no Jewish king at all; Judea was ruled directly by a Roman governor.

Apocalyptic Eschatology

- Although the vast majority of ordinary Jews probably did not worry much about the politics of the land of Israel, some Jews did take seriously the differences between what God appears to have promised in his covenants and what was actually going on in the world in which they lived. One important way in which such Jews made sense of this situation was a mode of thinking that historians call apocalyptic eschatology. Apocalyptic eschatology refers to teachings about the end of this world, teachings that human beings have learned through revelation from God. It is revealed knowledge of the end times.

- We find apocalyptic eschatology in numerous Jewish and Christian writings. Such Old Testament books as Isaiah, Zechariah, and Ezekiel contain some apocalyptic eschatology, as do nearly all the books of the

New Testament. Some books are entirely apocalyptic, including Daniel in the Old Testament, the Revelation to John in the New Testament, and such works as 1 and 2 Enoch outside the Bible.

- Jewish apocalyptic eschatology forms the context for the preaching of Jesus and the beliefs of the first Christians. Or, to put it better, the preaching of Jesus and the beliefs of the first Christians are Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, and so we need to understand this way of thinking as best we can. Forms of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology are diverse, but nearly all such texts share the same core ideas. Apocalyptic eschatology says that God will keep his promises to his people, but in the future. Foreign rulers will be overthrown, God's people will live in justice in the land, and a king appointed by God will indeed reign.

Messiah Figures

- In apocalyptic writings, revelations about the present and future times usually come in highly symbolic visions. The scenarios that these visions present vary, but they usually feature one or more human or superhuman figures whose role is to assist God in defeating the powers of evil and establishing his kingdom. Such a figure is often called an "anointed one"—in Hebrew, Messiah, and in Greek, Christ.

- In the symbolic scenarios, the Messiah figures often act like kings by making war on God's enemies and, once victorious, ruling God's kingdom. They sometimes act like priests by establishing proper worship of God, often in a new, more sacred temple. And they sometimes act like prophets by calling people to live righteous lives faithful to God's Law. Sometimes a single Messiah does all these things, and sometimes these tasks are divided among two or more Messiahs.

- One of the most famous Messiah figures appears in chapter 7 of Daniel. Daniel reports a vision in which he sees God himself on his throne, preparing to judge all people. A beast that represents an evil earthly power is killed. Then Daniel reports:

> I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

- Who is this figure? Most scholars believe that he is some kind of angel, perhaps the archangel Michael. Michael appears in chapter 12 of Daniel as the figure who will usher in the final days, and he is called there "the great prince." Whoever this figure from Daniel 7 was supposed to be, he became the model or paradigm for many subsequent Messiah figures in early Jewish literature. He is sometimes referred to in brief as the Son of Man.

- Another key idea in the book of Daniel is the resurrection of the dead. Apocalyptic eschatology includes a final judgment, when the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded. God's chosen ones are encouraged to remain faithful, for they will be vindicated when the judgment happens. But what about all the generations of people who are dead when the end times come? Daniel and other works claim that many, if not all, dead people will be resurrected, and they, too, will be judged and receive reward or punishment.

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Jesus of Nazareth

- Ancient Jews varied in how much they cared about or believed in the claims of apocalyptic eschatology. Many of its proponents belonged to no organized group among the Jews. Rather, they were freelance prophets who felt called by God to proclaim his coming kingdom and urge people to repent.

- The Romans did not appreciate the preaching of Jewish eschatological prophets. After all, such prophets proclaimed the end of the world order that the Romans ruled and the establishment of a new kingdom of God.

- Jesus of Nazareth was one of these eschatological prophets. Around the year 30, Jesus was crucified by the Romans. After his death, some of his followers proclaimed that Jesus was in fact God's Messiah, the King of the Jews, the Son of Man from Daniel 7.

- The earliest account of the birth of faith in Jesus comes from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which was written in the 50s of the 1st century, before the gospels. What Paul reports is simple: Jesus appeared to people after his death. Some of these appearances were to single persons, including Paul himself, and some were to groups of people, including a mass experience of hundreds.

- From Jesus's own preaching, his followers knew that these appearances meant that Jesus had been raised from the dead. This is what was supposed to happen at the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus must be the first person to be resurrected, and indeed, Paul calls Jesus "the first fruits" of the general resurrection of the dead. Moreover, God's raising of Jesus vindicated his identity as King of the Jews, the Messiah.

- All of this raised big questions: Why did Jesus the Messiah have to die? When will he come back and establish God's kingdom? How is he related to God? Is he divine himself? Who gets to be included in the coming kingdom of God—only Jews, or Gentiles as well? How will it be decided who's in and who's out? These are the questions that the writers of the New Testament books wrestled with, and they are the sources of the diversity of early Christian theology.

Suggested Reading

Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*.
Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews*.

1 THESSALONIANS AND PAUL'S MINISTRY

The earliest piece of Christian literature that survives is Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. It was originally written around the year 50, some 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus—although the oldest copy of it that we have dates to the late 2nd century. Paul's background, as well as the topics he chooses to address in 1 Thessalonians, give us insight into the history of early Christianity and the concerns of believers during this important period.

The Life of Paul

- It's important to remember that Paul the Apostle lived and died before any of the gospels that we have appeared. In fact, Paul would not have known he was a Christian, as the word did not exist yet. Instead, he was a Jew who had been called by God's Messiah, Jesus, to bring to Gentiles, non-Jews, the good news that Jesus would return soon to establish God's kingdom.

- Our sources of information about Paul consist of the letters attributed to him in the New Testament and the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is what historians call a secondary source. It was written as many as 70 years after Paul's death, and it puts a particular spin on Paul's ministry and his relations with other Christian leaders. Historians accept as true some of what Acts says about Paul, but we are far safer relying on the letters instead.

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- The letters of Paul are primary sources. That presents its own problems, because they give us Paul's view of himself and only occasionally convey what others thought about him—once again, from Paul's perspective. Moreover, most historians do not think that Paul wrote all 13 of the New Testament letters that bear his name.

- Seven letters are recognized by all scholars as having been composed by Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. If we want the most solid historical evidence for Paul's life, we should rely on these. And in fact, we can learn a lot about Paul just from them.

- Paul was a Greek-speaking Diaspora Jew. That is, he was born and lived most of his life outside the traditional land of Israel, and he spoke and wrote in Koine Greek, which was the common language of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Paul seems not to have known Hebrew, which means he would have read the Jewish Bible in a Greek translation. His quotations from the Old Testament do not always match our English translations from the Hebrew because he was quoting the Greek, often from memory.

- In his letter to the Philippians and elsewhere, Paul reports that his family belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. More significantly, he says that he was a Pharisee with respect to the Law. From this we can suppose certain things about how Paul thought before he believed in Jesus. The Pharisees were flexible in their interpretation of the Jewish Law and of the Bible as a whole; they did not always stick to a strictly literal meaning of the text. And in fact, Paul in his letters frequently interprets the Bible symbolically as referring to Christ.

- Likewise, most Pharisees accepted the ideas of apocalyptic eschatology. That is, they looked forward to the future coming of a Messiah, a final judgment of all people, and the establishment of a kingdom of God. They believed that the dead would be resurrected during the end times. These were ideas that the believers in Jesus also held, so Paul did not have to change many of his basic convictions when he accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

- Paul considered himself a very good Jew. He was, he told the Philippians, blameless as to righteousness under the Law. Indeed, Paul was such a zealous Jew that he was, he said, "a persecutor of the church." He violently attacked the Jesus movement and, he says, tried to destroy it. How did Paul persecute the church? Most likely he tried to get Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah expelled from synagogues or, at the very least, punished by flogging or other penalties.

- It was a major change, then, when Paul went from being a persecutor of Jesus believers to being a believer himself. This happened probably two or three years after Jesus's crucifixion. According to Paul in his letter to the Galatians, God revealed his Son to him. That is, Paul saw Jesus. Paul says that God had set him apart before he was born and called him through grace, so that he might proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles. This is the language that prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah use to describe their calls to be prophets.

- Paul did not call himself a prophet, however. He claimed to be an apostle. The word comes from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning "someone who has been sent"—that is, an envoy or representative. As Christ's apostle, Paul had been sent by Christ to speak for him among Gentiles.

- Why would God want Paul to bring his message about Jesus to Gentiles? That, too, was part of what some Jews expected would happen in the last days, when God would establish his kingdom and restore righteousness in Jerusalem. Certain prophecies suggested that people from "the nations"—that is, Gentiles—would turn to worship the God of the Jews when he vindicates Israel and establishes his kingdom. It was Paul's job to start gathering such righteous Gentiles and preparing them for the return of Jesus.

- After Paul had received this commission, he says that he began to preach in Arabia and the area around Damascus. After doing this for three years, he visited Jerusalem and met the Apostle Peter, then continued to carry

out his missionary work in Syria and other regions. During the 50s, Paul founded Christian groups in Greece and Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. He made plans to travel west to Rome and beyond to Spain.

- It's likely that Paul did make it to Rome, but as a prisoner. Around the year 60, Paul was arrested, probably in Jerusalem. That's what Acts tells us, and because Paul mentions in his letter to the Romans his plans to travel to Jerusalem, it may be accurate. Later Christian tradition says that Paul was executed in Rome under the emperor Nero, which would have been in the early to mid-60s. The New Testament does not tell us this, and we have no direct evidence to confirm it, but it seems possible and maybe even probable.

Persecutions in Thessalonica

- Thessalonica was a port city on the Aegean Sea, in the Roman province of Macedonia. It was also located on the Via Egnatia, a major road from the city of Byzantium in the east to the Adriatic Sea in the west.

- Paul tended to establish congregations in cities by the sea or along major trade routes. In such places, he could easily settle as one of the many people who came and went, and he could support himself through handiwork. Acts tells us that he made tents, which is entirely plausible. After Paul had moved on to a new city, he could dispatch colleagues to visit the places he had been and sometimes carry letters from him.

- Paul founded a Christian community in Thessalonica. Once he felt that it was on a strong path, he moved on to work somewhere else. In the letter, he tells the Thessalonians that he wanted to return to visit them, but circumstances prevented it, or as Paul puts it, "Satan blocked our way." Instead, Paul had sent his colleague Timothy to make sure that the Thessalonian believers were not being "shaken by these persecutions."

- It was after Timothy had returned to Paul that Paul wrote his letter. Timothy reported to Paul that the Thessalonians continued in faith and love and looked forward to seeing Paul again. Everything was not perfect among the Thessalonian Christians, however.

Words of Encouragement

- Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians provides an excellent example of the typical structure of a Pauline letter. It's simple and consists of four unequal parts:
  - The first item in Paul's letters is the salutation, in which Paul identifies himself and greets the recipients of the letter.
  - The second item is usually the thanksgiving, in which Paul gives thanks for the recipients and their faith. Sometimes Paul gives thanks for specific behaviors among the recipients that he wishes to praise and announces key themes of the letter.
  - The third item is the body of the letter, in which Paul addresses the topic or topics he wishes to discuss. These vary widely from letter to letter, but almost all of them include what scholars call parenesis—moral exhortation through which the writer tells people how to behave, warns them against bad practices, comforts them amidst challenges, and encourages them to be better people. The body of 1 Thessalonians consists almost entirely of parenesis.
  - The fourth item is the closing, which includes various elements. Paul prays for God to bless the recipients, and he asks them to pray for him. He sometimes greets specific members of the congregation by name. In 1 Thessalonians, as elsewhere, he commands them to make sure that the letter is read to everyone.

- Throughout 1 Thessalonians, Paul refers to persecutions that he and his followers suffer. By this, he probably does not mean organized government persecution of believers in Jesus; we do not get evidence for much of that until after Paul's lifetime. Instead, he is probably referring to social pressure and alienation from nonbelievers. The Jesus believers had turned away from their idols—that is, they had given up worshiping the traditional gods—and this offended family members and neighbors.

- Persecution from outsiders was not the only reason that the Thessalonians may have been worried or discouraged. They were also concerned that some members of the group had died and might miss out on the return of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom. Paul tackles this topic starting at verse 13 of chapter 4. He encourages the believers not to grieve, saying that when Jesus descends from heaven—an event he calls "the coming of the Lord"—the dead will be raised, and Paul and the other believers who are alive will be caught up in clouds and meet Jesus in the air.

- When Paul wrote this letter, he believed that he would still be alive when Jesus returned. But he also tells the Thessalonians that they really can't know when it will happen. The day of the Lord, he says, will come like a thief in the night. It's unpredictable, and there's no point in learning more about times and seasons. The Thessalonian believers, however, should remain vigilant, prepared at any moment for the Lord's coming.

- The overall message that Paul wants to communicate is one of encouragement, comfort, and moral living. Even though the Thessalonian believers have been rejected by their family and friends, and even though they have suffered deaths in their community, they should encourage one another, build each other up, and live peacefully and lovingly with one another.

- The Thessalonians are more than just an assembly of people, Paul says; they are a family, brothers and sisters. And Paul is like their nurse: "We were gentle among you," Paul writes, "like a nurse tenderly caring for her children." He is also like their father: "We dealt with each one of you like a father with his children." The Thessalonians should imitate Paul, caring for one another as he did for them and persevering in the face of persecution as he did when faced with hostility from his fellow Jews.

- It can be hard for us to imagine the excitement and anxiety of these early believers in Thessalonica, who gave up the religious practices of their ancestors to join a strange and miniscule movement. On the one hand, Paul says that they have experienced great joy and power in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, they have known persecution and loss. Paul's letter encourages them to remain faithful to God and Jesus, to him as their apostle, and to each other as they await the imminent arrival of their Lord Jesus.

Suggested Reading

Harrill, *Paul the Apostle*.
Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*.

THE SALVATION OF GENTILES IN GALATIANS

Paul's Letter to the Galatians is a letter of rebuke, meant to chastise them for turning away from the message that Paul proclaimed and accepting what he calls a different gospel. Other missionaries for Jesus had persuaded the Galatians that not only must they have faith in Jesus as God's Messiah, they must also become Jews and follow the Law. Paul calls this a perversion of the gospel of Christ, with nothing less than the saving nature of Jesus's death at stake.

Confusion in Galatia

- Paul addresses his letter to "the churches in Galatia"—that is, to multiple Christian groups in the Roman province of Galatia. We don't know how many such groups there were. Galatia was a large province in the western central area of Asia Minor, which corresponds to modern-day Turkey. The groups to whom Paul wrote must have been close enough to one another that they could easily share Paul's letter. They were probably clustered in Galatia's northern or southern regions.

- The Galatian believers were Gentiles—that is, non-Jews—whom Paul persuaded to have faith in Jesus as God's Messiah. Thanks to such faith, they would be saved from the wrath and judgment that would come when Jesus returned to establish God's kingdom on earth. When the Galatian believers accepted Paul's message, they had to make big changes in their lives. They had to give up their worship of all gods other than the God of Israel and follow the strong moral and ethical code found in the Jewish Bible.

- After Paul had departed Galatia to do missionary work elsewhere, other Jewish apostles of Jesus arrived. Like Paul, these missionaries believed that Jesus was the Messiah, that God had raised him from the dead, and that Jesus would return to judge people and establish God's kingdom. We can imagine that they were impressed with how many converts Paul had gained and were pleased with these believers' eagerness to follow Jesus and serve the God of Israel.

- These missionaries told the Galatians that it was not enough to believe in Jesus and his God, to give up their old gods, and to lead moral lives. Instead, they must complete their conversion by becoming Jews—getting circumcised if they were men and keeping kosher whether they were men or women.

- The Galatians knew that Paul had told them nothing about getting circumcised or keeping kosher. When they told their visitors this, these other apostles apparently played down Paul's authority. Paul, they pointed out, never met Jesus. He became an apostle some three years after the resurrection of Jesus and must therefore have learned his teaching of the gospel secondhand, from earlier apostles.

- Whatever these missionaries said, it was enough to persuade the Galatian believers to become Jews—that is, to get circumcised and follow the Law. Paul soon learned about their decision, either because the Galatians sent him a letter telling him or because word reached him through traveling believers, and he was not happy.

Gentiles and the Law

- In his letter, Paul defends his own authority right from the start. He identifies himself as "Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission, nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead." Later in chapter 1, he insists that he received his gospel from no human source, but "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." After Jesus called him to be his apostle, Paul says that he conferred with no human being, but started his missionary work on his own.

- But Paul knows that this will not be enough to convince the Galatians to listen to him rather than to his rivals. So Paul recounts the history of debate over whether Gentile believers must get circumcised and follow the Law, and then he explains how the gospel he preaches is based on the Bible—how even the story of Abraham supports his argument against circumcision.

- In chapter 2, Paul describes a meeting that took place between him and his colleagues Barnabas and Titus, on the one hand, and persons he calls "acknowledged leaders" or "pillars"—Peter, James, and John—on the other hand. The meeting took place in Jerusalem in the late 40s, perhaps in 48. Its purpose was to discuss Paul's mission of recruiting Gentiles to believe in Jesus without requiring them to convert to Judaism by getting circumcised and following the Law in its entirety.

- It must be the case that Jesus himself left no instructions as to how to include Gentiles in the salvation that he preached. According to the gospels, Jesus confined his mission to his fellow Jews in Galilee and Judea, and he interacted with Gentiles only when they approached him. As a result, the believers could not rely on teachings from Jesus to settle this question.

- According to Paul, Peter and the others recognized that God was at work in what Paul was doing, and the gathered leaders reached agreement on two points: First, there would be two missionary programs. Paul and his team would take the gospel to Gentiles, while Peter, James, and their team would take the gospel to the Jews. Although Paul does not say so explicitly, the Peter group must have agreed that the Gentiles that Paul recruited did not need to be circumcised. Second, Paul agreed to raise money among his Gentile converts for the poor believers in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

- Paul sums up this history by telling the Galatians that this controversy concerns the very heart of the gospel. The gospel is that all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are justified—or made righteous—by having faith in Jesus, not by getting circumcised and following the Law. At the end of chapter 2, Paul writes, "If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." That is, if Gentiles need to become Jews to be righteous, then Christ's death was unnecessary.

- Paul provides a series of arguments in favor of his view that Gentiles need only to have faith in Christ to be made righteous and thus worthy of salvation. Some of these arguments focus on the story of Abraham. According to Paul, Abraham is not an example of becoming righteous by circumcision, but of becoming righteous through faith. It is baptism into Christ, not circumcision, that makes someone Abraham's offspring. Abraham's story shows that the Gentile believers are children of God by a promise, not merely by the flesh.

- Paul notes that the Law of Moses, with its kosher requirements and the like, did not originate until hundreds of years after God's promise to Abraham. It did not, he says, invalidate the promise to Abraham and the Messiah still to come, just as once someone has sealed their will, nothing can change it.

- If the Law of Moses does not alter God's original promise to Abraham and the Messiah, then why was it given? As Paul puts it, the Law guarded and imprisoned people until faith would come. Living by the Law was meant to be temporary until faith arrived. "The law was our disciplinarian," Paul writes, "until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith." Throughout chapter 4 and into chapter 5, Paul develops this theme of believers in Christ as true children of God because they have been adopted as part of a promise.

Modern Thinking

- As we think about the letter to the Galatians, there are two important ways in which our modern situation may lead us to misunderstand what Paul was saying. First, we are used to seeing Judaism and Christianity as two separate religions. In our world, Jews do not believe in Jesus, and Christians are Gentiles who do. But in Paul's world, things were quite

different. For him, there were Jews who believed in Jesus (albeit not many), Jews who did not, Gentiles who believed in Jesus (again, not many), and Gentiles who did not.

- Paul's letter is addressed only to Gentiles who believe in Jesus. He says they should not get circumcised and become Jews because they are made righteous only by faith in Christ. Paul is not writing to Jews who believe in Jesus, and as far as we know, he never did. Paul probably thought that it was perfectly OK for Jewish believers in Jesus to circumcise their sons and to keep kosher—after all, they were Jews. But they would need to understand that it was actually their faith in Jesus that made them righteous.

- Second, we need to remember that when Paul says that believers are not saved by "works of the law," he does not mean good works, like helping the poor and being sexually chaste. In later centuries, great Christian theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther did interpret Paul to be making that argument. Paul, they said, is teaching Christians that being good is useless for their salvation, that they are saved only by faith. That may or may not be good Christian theology, but it's not Paul's theology.

- By "works of the law," Paul means getting circumcised, keeping kosher, and doing other things that distinguish Jews from Gentiles. Paul fully expects—indeed, he demands—that his followers lead morally upright lives. As he tells the Galatians in chapter 5, they should exhibit what he calls "the fruit of the Spirit"—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." The believers must avoid what he calls the works of the flesh, such as sexual immorality, idolatry, anger, and so on.

- Believers in Jesus can bear the fruit of the Spirit because they have been baptized and created anew. "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything," he writes, "but a new creation is everything!" Paul believed

that if the Galatians were to seek righteousness through circumcision and the Law, they would be denying this new creation and rendering the death and resurrection of Christ of no use.

Suggested Reading

Fredriksen, *Paul*.
Gager, *Reinventing Paul*.

ROMANS ON GOD, FAITH, AND ISRAEL

Paul's Letter to the Romans is his theological masterpiece. Few books of the Bible have inspired and perplexed as many Christians throughout history. The great theme of Romans is the trustworthy character of the God of Israel—God keeps his promises, and thus believers can be confident that he will save them based on their faith in him and his promises.

Connecting with Rome

- In his Letter to the Romans, Paul was writing to congregations that he had not founded, introducing the gospel that he preached to believers, most of whom he had not met. Paul knew that his message that Gentiles—non-Jews—are made righteous solely through faith in Jesus Christ and not through following the Jewish Law was controversial. His letter explains why he believes this so strongly and lays the groundwork for a planned visit to Rome.

- When Paul wrote this letter in the middle or late 50s, he had not been to Rome. Someone else—probably multiple people—had brought the message about Jesus there before him. Church tradition makes Peter the first apostle to preach in Rome, and indeed the first bishop of Rome. It's plausible that Peter did do missionary work in Rome, but probably others whose names we don't know did so as well. Historians don't believe that Peter ever held a formal office there, however, because such offices did not exist in this early period.

- Why did Paul write to churches that he did not found? He explains at the beginning of the letter and then again toward the end that he plans to visit Rome soon and then go on to Spain. Up to this point, Paul had been doing all his work in the eastern Mediterranean, but he believed that he had completed his work there. He tells the Roman believers that he hopes to spend some time with them and then, as he puts it, be sent on to Spain by them—which means that Paul hoped that the Romans would financially support his journey.

- In the final chapter of the letter, Paul greets an astonishing number of Roman believers by name—so many that some scholars once doubted that this chapter was authentic. But it all makes sense: Most of the people he names used to live in the eastern Mediterranean and had moved to Rome;

others Paul had never met, but had heard about. Paul was networking, as we would put it—establishing a connection with the Romans by naming as many of them as he could.

- Most of the Roman believers had not met Paul, but they had doubtless heard about him, and not everything they had heard would have been positive. Paul had numerous critics among his fellow apostles. If Paul was going to receive a warm welcome from the Romans and get their support for his planned mission in Spain, he needed to make clear what he really preached and persuade them that it was the true gospel of Christ.

The Role of Faith

- After giving thanks for the faith of the Roman believers, Paul begins by stating what he believes and teaches. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," Paul proclaims:

> It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

- This is Paul's gospel in a nutshell and the thesis of Romans: The gospel means that everyone is saved or made righteous through faith, both Jews and Gentiles. The righteousness or justice of God is revealed—it's not Paul's teaching; it comes from God—and it is revealed through God's own faithfulness so that human beings will have faith in him.

- In the first three chapters, Paul hopes to establish that both Jews and Gentiles have sinned and therefore neither is in a better position than the other. Both need to be made righteous through faith. Paul comes to his

summary point of this first part of the letter: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

- Paul next turns to the question of the Law, asking at the end of chapter 3, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" That is, does Paul's teaching of righteousness through faith contradict or even throw out the Law? "By no means!" he answers. "On the contrary, we uphold the law." Chapters 4–8 are devoted to explaining how this is so.

- Here, we must pay attention to how Paul thinks of sin. For him, sin is not just a set of bad things people do, not just the accumulation of all their acts of wickedness. Instead, sin is a cosmic power that has people in its control. And sin even uses the Law to make people captive to it. The Law, then, cannot rescue the human being from sin; only faith in Jesus Christ can do that.

The Salvation of Israel

- In chapters 9–11, Paul faces major theological questions that are the heart of the Letter to the Romans. Can a person truly have faith in the God of Israel if so many Jews do not have faith in Jesus and so appear not to be saved? God made promises to Abraham, Moses, and David—is he not going to keep them? If it has always been God's plan to save Jews and Gentiles through faith, why do so few Jews have faith?

- At the beginning of chapter 9, Paul expresses his personal pain over this situation: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh." As Paul states, the covenants, the Law, God's promises—these things belong to the Jews. And yet hardly any Jews believe in God's Messiah, Jesus.

- Paul insists: "It is not as though the word of God had failed." That is, God has not gone back on his word to Israel, and God can be trusted. What follows are some of Paul's most profound reflections on the character of God and how he deals with human beings.

- Paul's first point is that God himself chooses how to keep the promises that he makes. He chooses to have mercy on whomever he chooses and to harden the heart of whomever he chooses. It's worth noticing that Paul has in mind here the big picture of how God keeps his promise to a people, a larger entity like Israel. He's not discussing how each person is saved—whether it is free will, predestination, or something else.

- Paul admits the current situation:

  > Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law.

  And why did Israel fail? Precisely because it did not have faith—that is, faith in Christ. This is indeed Israel's fault, Paul says—an act of disobedience.

- Paul insists, however, that God will remain faithful to Israel. He writes, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." The faith of Paul and other believing Jews means that there is still a faithful remnant of Israel; as in the past, that remnant guarantees that God will save Israel.

- Paul very much wants to encourage humility and gratitude among the Gentile believers. They depend on Israel for their salvation. God's promises to Israel form the root of the tree onto which the Gentile

believers have been grafted, and Paul says that God will in fact graft back on the fallen branches. Paul expresses his confidence here that Israel's unbelief is part of God's plan and will be removed at the end.

- This is important news for Paul's Gentile audience because it assures them of God's trustworthy character. God will keep his promises to Israel, Paul is saying, and thus you can count on him to keep his promises to you. You may not always see the reasons for what God is doing at any particular moment, but you can be certain that he is working toward the fulfillment of what he has promised to those who have faith in him.

Acceptance and Gratitude

- In the final chapters of the letter, Paul describes the way of life that should follow from a relationship with God based on promise and faith. He sums it up in chapter 15, verse 7: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." That is, the believers should accept one another in all their diversity, without judging one another, just as God has accepted them in Christ.

- In chapter 14, for example, Paul observes that different believers may have different customs when it comes to eating and observing certain days as holier than others. This diversity probably reflects Rome's character as an immigrant city. Roman churches consisted of people from many different places, and they brought with them diverse customs. Paul urges the believers to accept one another's differences.

- Even more symbolic or meaningful is the collection of money that Paul plans to bring to Jerusalem. Paul has gathered contributions from Gentile believers for the poor Jewish believers who live in and around Jerusalem.

This collection expresses the gratitude and solidarity that the Gentiles should have for their Jewish brothers and sisters: "If the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings," Paul writes, "they ought also to be of service to them in material things."

- This is another expression of the great theme of Romans: Righteousness through faith in Jesus does not mean that God has discarded the Jewish Law or that he has rejected his people, the Jews. Instead, the fact that Gentiles can be saved through their faith depends on God keeping his faith to Israel. That God will do, Paul says, and so all Israel will be saved.

Suggested Reading

Bassler, *Navigating Paul*.
Meeks and Fitzgerald, *The Writings of St. Paul*.

COMMUNITY CONFLICTS IN 1–2 CORINTHIANS

Corinth was one of the largest and most prosperous cities in ancient Greece. It was also the home of one of the most energetic, enthusiastic, and fractured congregations in early Christianity. The Apostle Paul founded the group around the year 50; his subsequent relationship with the Corinthian believers was, to put it mildly, a bumpy one. The religious energy and communal divisions of this congregation inspired some of Paul's most eloquent expressions of Christian faith as well as some of his most anguished and angry expressions of pain.

Correspondence with Corinth

- The New Testament contains two letters from Paul to the Corinthian believers, but the correspondence between Paul and his followers was much more complicated than that. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, chapter 7, Paul refers to a letter that the Corinthians had written to him asking a series of questions, and in chapter 5, he mentions an earlier letter that he had sent to them. Neither of these letters survive.

- In 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, Paul says that he had written another letter to the group "out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears." A very small number of scholars think that this so-called "letter of tears" is 1 Corinthians, but most have disagreed. Others have suggested that we have a remnant of the letter of tears in 2 Corinthians, chapters 10–13, which have an anguished tone that contrasts with the first nine chapters of that letter.

- Most scholars think that 2 Corinthians was not originally a single letter, but consists of fragments of two or more letters that someone put together at some point, probably after Paul's death. In addition to those historians who think that chapters 10–13 must be from a different letter, some think that even the first nine chapters contain bits of multiple letters.

- This puzzle cannot be solved without some new evidence. The important thing for us to realize is that there are always going to be things in 1 and 2 Corinthians that modern readers won't understand because we have only pieces of a long and complex exchange of correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians.

- For these reasons, it will not be worthwhile for us to attempt to reconstruct the history of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians. Instead, we can use these letters as the opportunity to look inside an early Christian congregation and see the problems and issues that divided it and that Paul had to confront.

Division and Conflict

- The community of Corinthian believers was rife with divisions, many of which reflected the social and economic diversity of the congregation. Although they were almost certainly all Gentiles, not Jews, the believers differed in status and power—socially, economically, intellectually, and religiously. Some were fairly wealthy, and others were laborers. Some had education; others did not. Some were free; others were slaves. Some could speak in tongues; others did not. These differences sometimes led to outright conflict.

- Paul addresses these conflicts through two powerful Christian symbols or metaphors—the crucified Messiah and the body of Christ. According to Paul, these two symbols showed that believers in Jesus should find their strength in weakness and their unity in diversity. The conflicts that troubled the Corinthians centered around four major issues: wisdom or spiritual insight, eating practices, spiritual gifts, and rhetorical eloquence.

- In 1 Corinthians, chapters 1–4, Paul describes the Corinthian believers as divided into factions based on their affiliation with an apostle, perhaps the one who baptized them. On the one hand, this seems to be pretty basic group loyalty; even today, people in a church or synagogue with multiple leaders may admire or identify with one leader more than others. On the other hand, it looks like some Corinthians claimed to have a higher wisdom or knowledge about the faith than others in the group.

- Differences in wealth and status show up in 1 Corinthians in questions concerning food. In chapters 8–10, Paul considers the problem of meat that has been offered to pagan gods. Is it acceptable for Christians to eat meat that was left over from a sacrifice to a pagan god? Most people would not care, but if you believed in Jesus, you might wonder whether it mattered where the meat came from. Among the Corinthian believers, some thought it was acceptable to eat such meat, and others thought it was not.

- Meanwhile, the Corinthian believers had problems with their own meals, as we see in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11. The believers in Corinth, like Christians in other places, met weekly to share the Lord's Supper. At this event, they would eat the bread and wine that commemorated the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples before his crucifixion. The bread and wine represented the body and blood of Christ. Unlike most Christians today, however, the Corinthians conducted this ritual as part of a regular dinner.

- It's possible that at these meals, the socially and economically more important Corinthians got better seats and more food and drink than their inferiors among the community. They would have considered this just normal social practice, but the result was that social and economic differences among the Corinthian believers were dividing them during their communal meal.

- The Corinthians were also divided over the issue of spiritual gifts. Believers in Jesus often manifested the presence of God's Spirit in various ways. They might receive a revelation from God to share with the group, they might experience healing of body or mind, they might cast out demons—or they might speak in tongues.

- It seems that in the Corinthian congregation, believers who received the gift of speaking in tongues took pride in their gift. They considered speaking in tongues to be a spiritual gift superior to others. Some scholars have suggested that social or economic factors may also be in play here—that is, that more socially powerful members of the community were the ones more likely to speak in tongues—but this does not seem probable.

- One final conflict among the Corinthians involved Paul more directly. In 2 Corinthians, chapters 10–13, Paul complains bitterly about rival Christian missionaries whom he sarcastically calls "super-apostles." The

Corinthian believers at some point had become entranced by visiting apostles who were superior to Paul in their rhetorical talents and in their ability to perform miracles.

- It's unclear whether Paul and these other apostles disagreed with each other about matters of belief, but they clearly differed in matters of style. According to Paul, the super-apostles claimed that he was humble when he was among the Corinthians in person, but bold when he would write from far away. In short, Paul was weak—even cowardly—not a good speaker, and unimpressive in person, and he made up for this by being aggressive and commanding in his letters. At least some of the Corinthians found these ideas persuasive.

The Example of Christ

- In Paul's view, jockeying for status and showing condescension toward fellow believers are incompatible with faith in Christ. It's Christ to whom Paul appeals in trying to overcome these divisions. As a crucified Messiah, Christ exemplifies strength in weakness, gaining power by giving it up. Just as believers make up the body of Christ, true unity requires diversity. Paul applies these ideas to the Corinthian conflicts.

- Paul preaches Jesus as God's Messiah, the Christ, the divinely appointed agent who will return to defeat God's enemies, bring the last judgment, and initiate God's new kingdom of justice and peace. Yet this divine figure of great power was crucified. He defeated sin and death by dying on the cross. Paul understands this to be a new paradigm of how strength and power work—they come through weakness, by giving up power, by sacrificing oneself for others.

- When some Corinthian believers claim to have a wisdom or knowledge that is superior to what others have, Paul replies that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. God's foolishness, he says, is wiser than human wisdom, and his weakness is stronger than human strength.

- God's wisdom does not come through human ways, Paul says. It's not synonymous with high learning or superior education. It is, he says, taught by the Spirit. In fact, Paul says, all the Corinthians by this measure were "infants in Christ," whom Paul had to feed with milk, not solid food. The Corinthians ought not to think more of themselves than they are. They ought not to claim allegiance to this or that apostle. Instead, they should understand that they belong solely to Christ and to God.

- Likewise, the Corinthian believers who claim the right to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols should take Christ as their role model. Christ gave up power for the sake of others. Paul says that the Corinthians who understand that idols are meaningless have the freedom to eat whatever food they want. But by making use of this right, they may be injuring their brothers and sisters who are not as strong in their belief. The strong believers should give up their right to act as they want for the sake of their weaker brothers and sisters.

- Paul applies this insight to his competition, so to speak, with the super-apostles. They had charged Paul with being a poor public speaker and a weak physical presence. Paul's response is to plead guilty as charged. Like the crucified Christ, Paul looks weak—indeed, he is weak—but that's where God's power is found. Paul doesn't end with weakness, however, instead emphasizing the power, the access to God's spiritual power, that human weakness brings. The bodies of Paul and Christ may be weak, but they are strong in spirit.

- Paul wants the Corinthian congregation to see itself as the body of the resurrected Christ in the world. For that reason, their practice of letting some believers go hungry at communal meals while others eat and drink a lot is not merely impolite; it's an offense against the body of Christ. Paul gives the Corinthians two alternatives: They can either wait for one another and make sure that everyone eats and drinks together, or they can eat meals apart and gather only for the Lord's Supper.

- Paul uses the image of the body of Christ to address also the question of spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, Paul explains that there are a variety of spiritual gifts, but they all come from one and the same Spirit. He provides a list of such gifts: utterances of wisdom and knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the ability to interpret tongue speaking. You'll notice that he lists tongue speaking and interpreting tongues last—that's no accident.

- He goes on to remind the Corinthians that they are a single body. The body, he notes, has many parts, and they all depend on one another. The eye can't say to the hand, I don't need you, nor can the head say to the feet, I don't need you. Parts of the body that we consider less honorable, even shameful, are the ones we clothe and do not want to be exposed to everyone, and so we treat them with greater respect.

- Paul agrees that the Corinthian believers should strive for spiritual gifts, which come from God and are good. But he argues, famously, that the greatest gift of all is love. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love," he says, "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Love does not insist on its own way, but it seeks to build up others and deals with them patiently. It's love that should guide the body of Christ, leading the believers to care for every person, especially those the world sees as weak and foolish.

Suggested Reading

Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.
Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*.

WORSHIP AND LEADERS IN PAUL'S CONGREGATIONS

Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth open a door for us to see how an early Christian congregation worked. How did these believers worship? Who were their leaders? Did men and women have different roles? Did they police adherence to the rules to which they had committed themselves, and if so, how? How were church activities financed? Although other letters of Paul give us scattered insights into these questions, without 1 and 2 Corinthians, we would not know nearly as much as we do.

Worship Services

- Paul's letters suggest that Corinthian worship gatherings were highly spontaneous, with individuals contributing as the Spirit moved them. Someone might sing a hymn and perhaps lead the group in singing. Another person could offer a lesson, probably something like a sermon. Someone could offer a revelation—that is, a message from God—which Paul calls prophecy. Some people would speak in tongues, which others would not be able to understand unless someone received the gift of interpretation. We know, too, that there was prayer, for Paul discusses what women should wear when they pray in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11.

- Paul approves of all these activities, which he considers gifts of the Holy Spirit, but he wants everything to be done for the edification of the entire group. For this reason, Paul expresses reservations about speaking in tongues, which it seems some Corinthian believers considered the best of all spiritual gifts. In fact, so many Corinthians were speaking in tongues that Paul feared that outsiders would think they were insane.

- Paul says that only two, or at most three, people should speak in tongues, and if no one receives the gift of interpretation, those speaking in tongues should do so silently, speaking only to God. Paul urges that two or three prophets should speak and let the group consider what they have said. The prophets should not speak over one another; each one should speak in turn.

- It seems likely that these activities of hymns, lessons, prophecies, prayer, and tongues took place at a gathering separate from what Paul calls the Lord's Supper. We learn from 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, that the believers celebrated the Supper as part of a complete meal. This is the earliest evidence for what would become the Christian Eucharist.

- Paul provides a short tradition about Christ's institution of the Supper and the words that he said. Almost certainly, believers repeated these words when they shared the bread that represented the body of Jesus and the cup of wine that represented the new covenant in his blood. Most likely the community broke the bread at the beginning of the meal, and they shared the wine at the end of the meal.

Expulsion and Baptism

- Paul believed that being part of the body of Christ was very powerful and that dividing the body or separating from it had real consequences. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, he advocates expelling a member of the community who was having sex with his father's wife, presumably the man's stepmother. It seems likely that the father was dead, but Paul still considered this an instance of sexual immorality—worse, Paul says, than what's found among the pagans.

- Paul tells the believers:

> When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

From other verses, it's clear that handing the man over to Satan means putting him out of the church in some sort of ritualized way. This would happen at a meeting of the believers, where even Paul would be present in spirit and the power of Jesus would be manifest.

- According to Paul, this action will result in the destruction of the man's flesh so that his spirit might be saved at the resurrection. Scholars are divided over what this means. One possibility is that "flesh" refers to

the man's evil sexual desires. In this case, Paul thinks that expulsion will lead the man to repent of his sexual immorality and thus perhaps gain salvation. Other scholars think that this is more literal—that Paul expects the man's physical body to suffer or even to die, causing him to repent and possibly be saved.

- Probably very few believers experienced the ritual of expulsion from the church. But they all went through the ritual of initiation into the church: baptism. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul writes, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." In baptism, a person was incorporated into the body of Christ through the activity of God's Spirit.

- Unfortunately, neither Paul nor any New Testament writer gives us a step-by-step description of how baptism was performed. In fact, there probably was no single way that baptism was performed in these early decades, and even today, Christians do not all follow the same procedure. Still, from scattered references, we can see some of the things that happened at this ritual.

- At the center, of course, was the action of dunking or dipping the person in water. In Paul's congregations, most people probably really were dunked in the water, rather than having water poured on them. In Romans, chapter 6, Paul calls baptism dying with Christ—the sinful self dies to sin in baptism, just as Christ died to sin on the cross. This analogy suggests dunking: The person went under water, as if dying and being buried.

- Dunking in water required the practical steps of removing one's clothing and putting clothes back on. These actions came to have symbolic significance. Taking off one's clothes symbolized, according to the Letter to the Colossians, stripping off the old human being with its practices. The baptized person then put on clothing that represented the new

human being, who is united with Christ. Most likely the initiates were also anointed with oil after removing their clothing and before their baptism.

- These actions—removing one's clothes, receiving an anointing with oil, being dunked in water, and putting on new clothes—together symbolized a profound transformation of the person. The old human being who was enslaved to sin was stripped off and died, and a new human being was created, one who was united with Christ and freed from the domination of sin and death. This new person was part of the body of Christ, one of many diverse members, and the recipient of gifts of the Spirit.

Leadership Roles

- Throughout his letters, Paul mentions a variety of leadership roles within the community of believers. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, he provides something of a list:

> God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

- Some of the items on this list are vague, such as "forms of assistance" and "forms of leadership," but others are titles that indicate ongoing roles, like apostles, prophets, and teachers. Prophets and teachers were people who at church meetings offered revelations from God, if they were prophets, or instruction on some spiritual topic, if they were teachers.

- Paul has the role of apostle, someone who had been sent forth by Christ to be his representative. Paul did not think that there were only 12 apostles whom Jesus had appointed during his lifetime. Paul refers to other persons as apostles as well, including Apollos, Andronicus, and

Junia. Paul also refers to several of his colleagues—Timothy, Titus, Silvanus, and others—who were collaborators in his apostolic mission and possessed their own authority and claim to leadership.

- Women filled many of the leadership roles in Paul's congregations. In Philippians, chapter 4, for example, Paul refers to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as among his colleagues. Another of Paul's colleagues was Priscilla, or Prisca, whom Paul mentions at the ends of Romans and 1 Corinthians. At the end of Romans, Paul calls Andronicus and Junia "prominent among the apostles." These two were probably a husband and wife team, and Paul says that they are relatives of his and spent time in prison with him.

- Later Christians have sometimes been uncomfortable with the idea of Paul calling Junia, a woman, prominent among the apostles. Surely, they have thought, only men could be apostles. To remove this problem, some Christians have argued that Paul was referring not to a woman named Junia, but to a man named Junias. But there are no other men from antiquity named Junias—this would be the only one. There are plenty of women named Junia. So this Junia surely was a woman.

- In Romans, chapter 16, we find Phoebe. In the first two verses of that chapter, Paul writes:

> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Whatever a deacon's duties were, Phoebe must have performed them. Phoebe was also a patron of many people, including Paul, and this was an important relationship in the Roman world.

- Paul's missionary work cost money. Paul frequently says that he supported himself and did not rely on his followers for his livelihood. But Paul himself could not have paid for everything, and we don't know whether colleagues such as Timothy and Titus likewise supported themselves. Patrons like Phoebe were essential to the Christian community. In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul refers to "Chloe's people," probably members of Chloe's household, slaves, or business associates—that is, clients of Chloe, another prominent woman.

Subordination and Silence

- Before we conclude that women were equal to men in Paul's communities, we should consider two other passages in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 11, Paul addresses the problem of what women should wear when they pray or prophesy. Specifically, Paul objects to the practice of women praying and prophesying without some sort of head covering. In arguing for his position, Paul clearly subordinates women to men. He explains that God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman.

- In chapter 14, Paul turns to the problem of order and disorder in Christian worship. He writes:

> As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

- This passage is very clear, but it raises all sorts of problems. For one thing, Paul already talked about women praying and prophesying—vocal activities—and did not object to their doing so. So how can he now say

that women must never speak in church? Paul's citation of the Law in support of female silence is strange because Paul frequently says that Christians need not follow the Jewish Law any longer.

- Scholars deal with these problems in several ways. Some argue that here Paul must be dealing with some sort of speech other than praying and prophesying. Perhaps Paul is condemning women who simply talk out of turn or ask questions, not women who pray and prophesy. Others suggest that Paul's reference to women asking their husbands questions at home may indicate that here he has in mind married women, while the women praying and prophesying were single women, without husbands.

- Still other scholars propose that Paul did not write these sentences at all, but they were added later by a Christian who wished to suppress female activity in the church. This would explain the contradiction with chapter 11. In some manuscripts, these verses appear later in the text, which may suggest that they were added somewhere else and moved. If you take these sentences out, the argument in chapter 14 continues seamlessly. The problem with this position is that no manuscript exists without these sentences.

- Even if Paul thought he could tell the female believers what to do, it is doubtful that he always got his way. And that's a very important lesson to learn from Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Paul may have been an apostle, commissioned by Jesus Christ, and he may have converted most of these former pagans to believing in Jesus. But the Christians in Corinth had minds of their own, and they believed that they, too, had received the Spirit of God. And sometimes Paul did not like that at all.

Suggested Reading

Kraemer and D'Angelo, *Women & Christian Origins*, chaps. 9 and 10.
McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*.
Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.
Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*.

PAUL'S THEOLOGY ON SLAVERY AND CHRIST

Paul's letters to Philemon and to the Philippians are quite different, but they have two things in common. First, Paul wrote both of them from prison. Second, slavery emerges as an interesting theme in each letter. In addition to providing insight into Paul's experiences in prison and his views on slavery, these letters communicate Paul's ideas, and those of other early believers in Jesus, about Christ's humanity and divinity.

Imprisonment and Slavery

- Ancient prisons such as the ones in which Paul found himself differed from modern ones in several ways. For one thing, the Romans did not imprison people to punish them for crimes. Punishment was usually either corporal—anything from beatings to execution—or financial. Prisons were for people awaiting trial, and so imprisonment was always temporary. Paul says that he was imprisoned multiple times, which is not surprising for someone who tended to get into trouble a lot.

- Secondly, prisons were local facilities. There was no Roman prison system, and detained persons might be held in a variety of secured locations, ranging from army barracks to private homes. Likewise, the conditions that prisoners experienced could vary dramatically. In fact, most prisoners, if they wanted to be even close to comfortable, had to make arrangements for their own food and supplies. They depended on family, friends, and slaves for support. Some prisoners had their slaves live with them and serve them in prison.

- This explains the circumstances in which Paul writes both of these letters. The believers in Philippi, a city that was located in what is today northeastern Greece, had sent to Paul while he was in prison a man named Epaphroditus, who brought gifts for Paul with him. These were probably supplies to make Paul more comfortable. Paul was extremely grateful for the visit of Epaphroditus and calls him "my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need."

- Philemon most likely reflects a similar situation. Paul writes to a believer named Philemon, who lived in Colossae in Asia Minor. He calls Philemon a dear friend and colleague, and we learn that Philemon hosts a Christian group in his house. Paul addresses Philemon about his slave Onesimus, whom Paul is sending back to Philemon.

- Paul's language is deferential and indirect, but he clearly expects that Philemon may not be happy with Onesimus and how long he has been separated from Philemon. If Onesimus has wronged his master in any way or owes him anything, Paul tells Philemon, "Charge that to my account." Paul says also that he has become Onesimus's father, which probably means that Paul has converted Onesimus to Christianity.

- Paul's congregations included slaves. More than once, Paul says that the distinction between slave and free does not apply in the Lord. We don't know whether slaves held positions of leadership within these groups, and if so, which ones. But surely enslaved believers would have received spiritual gifts, just as free ones did, and thus they, too, would have prophesied, spoken in tongues, performed healings, and so on.

- Paul did not hesitate to use slavery as a theological metaphor. Rather, Paul believed that there was slavery in the spiritual realm as well as in the social world. At the beginning of Philippians, Paul identifies himself and Timothy as "slaves of Christ Jesus." At the start of Romans, he calls himself "a slave of Jesus Christ." When modern translations make this "servant," they miss the force of what Paul was saying in his ancient context. Paul was not employed by Jesus; he belonged to Jesus.

- In general, Paul did not see the human condition as one of absolute freedom. Instead, he believed that all human beings live as slaves. We see this most clearly in chapter 6 of Romans. People who are not baptized, who do not have faith in Christ, are slaves of sin. They are owned by sin, obliged to serve sin with their bodies, just as the bodies of slaves belonged to their masters.

- Paul claimed that in baptism, people die to sin. They become freed from sin, liberated by the death of Christ. They are therefore no longer obliged to sin and can use their bodies not as instruments of wickedness but as instruments of righteousness. This does not mean, however, that baptized

believers are free. "You have been freed from sin," Paul writes, "and enslaved to God." The human condition is slavery—whether to sin and death or to righteousness and God.

The Divinity of Jesus

- Philippians contains one of the most famous passages in Paul's letters. In chapter 2, he encourages the Philippian believers not to look after their own interests, but the interests of others. In verses 5–11, he writes:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
>
> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- Paul did not make this passage up. It's an early Christian hymn that Paul quotes. We can tell it's a hymn based on its rhythm and style, but we do not know who wrote it or how much older than Paul it is. This hymn tells a sacred story about Jesus. It says that he preexisted in some divine form, became human, and then ascended back to heaven in some higher state.

- According to the hymn, Jesus had some sort of existence before his life as a human being. In that existence, he was in the form of God—he had some sort of divine nature, but was not God the Father. But Christ did

not seize or take advantage of his divine status; rather, he gave up his divine position and took the form of a slave—that is, he became like a human being. Christ willingly became enslaved to cosmic powers as a human being; death was the ultimate power to which he submitted.

- In reward for this self-abasement, God exalted Jesus to an even higher status and gave him "the name that is above every name." What is that name? The hymn delays revealing this. At first, it suggests the name might be Jesus, for at this name, every knee should bend "in heaven and on earth and under the earth." But they all will confess that Jesus Christ is "Lord." "Lord" is the name that is above every name, for it is the name that God bears in the Jewish Bible—the Lord. Jesus now bears the very name of God.

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- This hymn and the story it tells draw on several strands in the biblical tradition. In Psalm 110:1, God says that the king will sit at his right hand "until I make your enemies your footstool." The enemies are the cosmic powers and lower divinities that rule this world, the ones that in Philippians, chapter 2, submit themselves to Christ. The last enemy to be destroyed is Death. At the general resurrection of the dead, all of Christ's enemies will have become his footstool.

- The hymn in Philippians, chapter 2, also quotes Psalm 8:6, which talks about God putting all things, not just enemies, in subjection under the feet of humanity. Paul refers this to Christ, and he makes clear that God is not one of the "all things" that will be subjected to Christ.

- Psalm 110:1 helps to explain how Christians came to understand Jesus's divine status: In accordance with this Psalm, Jesus at the resurrection sat at God's right hand. He received a promotion, so to speak, in the cosmic hierarchy, with all other divine beings subjected to him, except for God the Father. We see this in the Philippians hymn. We also see the idea that Christ somehow existed before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

The Preexistent Christ

- In Old Testament passages like Proverbs, chapter 8, the Wisdom of God acts like an extension of God, a semi-independent divine being. She is personified as a female because the word "wisdom" in both Hebrew and Greek is feminine in gender. In Proverbs 8:22, Wisdom declares, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." Wisdom was brought forth before there were waters, hills, mountains—indeed, the entire earth. Wisdom goes on to claim that she existed before anything else did, and she was present with God when he made the world and assisted him in that work.

- The early Jewish believers in Jesus identified Christ with this figure of Wisdom. It was Christ whom God brought forth before everything else and Christ who assisted God in the creation of this world. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, for example, Paul calls Christ the Power and Wisdom of God.

- Psalm 110 and Proverbs 8 were key passages from the Old Testament that early believers applied to Jesus and used to explain his divine status. Another was Daniel, chapter 7, in which a figure called "one like a son of man" comes on clouds of heaven and receives everlasting dominion over all peoples, nations, and languages. Whoever that figure was originally meant to be, once the followers of Jesus believed that Jesus had been exalted to heaven, they could easily identify him as that figure.

- These scriptural passages became the building blocks for the cosmic story of Jesus told in Philippians, chapter 2: Jesus preexisted with God as a somewhat divine being. He gave that up to enter a human life, and, like all human beings, he became enslaved to the cosmic powers, even Death. God then exalted Jesus to a position of even greater power, God's right hand, and he will soon subject all other lower divine powers to Jesus. Jesus will return in triumph, and all will be raised from the dead—the defeat of the last enemy, Death.

- Because all of this is present already in the letters of Paul, written in the 50s, it's clear that the creation of these beliefs happened very fast, within 20 years of Jesus's death at the most. This way of looking at Jesus as divine is not quite what Christians would eventually declare as official orthodoxy at church councils during the 4th century, after the Roman Empire became Christian. At that time, Christian leaders declared that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equally divine and eternal, and that they are somehow three beings and yet only one God.

- In comparison to that doctrine, Paul has a more fluid sense of divinity. For him, Christ is divine—not quite as divine as God his Father, but more so than the lower cosmic divinities over whom he has gained power. Nonetheless, already in the letters of Paul, the earliest Christian writings, we find the core belief of most Christians: Jesus is both human and divine, and the agent by which God has saved a fallen world.

Suggested Reading

Harrill, "Paul and Slavery."
Juel, *Messianic Exegesis*.

ADAPTING PAUL'S TEACHINGS TO NEW SITUATIONS

Paul's missionary work was always shared work. Timothy, Titus, Prisca and Aquila, Euodia, Syntyche—these and more Paul called his coworkers. Paul even presented most of his letters as cowritten. Timothy, Sosthenes, and Silvanus appear at the beginning of letters as coauthors, though Paul undoubtedly did the writing. Ironically, this tradition continued after Paul's death: Later followers and admirers of Paul wrote letters in his name, presenting their ideas as those of the great apostle.

Evaluating Authenticity

- Of the 13 letters in the New Testament that claim to have been written by Paul, historians agree—as unanimously as historians agree about anything—that Paul wrote seven: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. That leaves six letters whose authenticity a substantial number of historians doubt.

- The six disputed letters fall into two groups of three. First are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which together are called the Pastoral Epistles. Practically no critical historians—those open to the possibility that the New Testament contains forged letters—believe that Paul is the author of the Pastoral Epistles. Most have concluded that these three letters were written well after Paul's death, probably in the early 2nd century.

- The letters in the second group—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians—are often referred to as Deutero-Pauline. These are closer to the genuine letters in content and probably date to the late 1st century, after Paul's death in the early 60s. A minority of critical historians think that Paul probably wrote one or more of these letters. Of these, a large minority thinks that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, a smaller group would say that about Colossians, and an even smaller number would support Ephesians.

- Historians decide that a letter is probably forged on two general grounds: first, whether the style and vocabulary match those of the genuine letters, and second, whether the content does. We can't say much here about the first point, which requires studying the original Greek. One example involves Ephesians, a letter of six chapters, which has nine sentences of more than 50 words each. In all the seven genuine letters of Paul, there are only nine such sentences. The style in Ephesians is just not how Paul wrote.

- Content is easier to see than style and vocabulary. As we look at 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians, we'll compare their teachings to those of the genuine letters. But we should not make this all about how these letters are not by Paul. Instead, we want to see the religious messages that these authors, whoever they were, wished to convey to their readers and why they did so.

Anxiety in 2 Thessalonians

- In 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, we learn that there are believers who have been "shaken in mind or alarmed" by the idea that "the day of the Lord is already here." To these Christians, the day of the Lord meant the return of Jesus Christ to bring an end to the current world, raise the dead, judge all people, and inaugurate God's kingdom. But they also believed it would be accompanied by turmoil and suffering, like persecutions, wars, and natural disasters.

- At the end of the letter, the author warns against what he calls idleness. Some believers are not working and earning their own living. "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," he declares. It's likely that the problem of idleness is related to worry about the day of the Lord. Some people may have quit their jobs in anticipation of the return of Jesus, or they are so shaken and upset that they are unable to work.

- Where would the believers have got the idea that the day of the Lord was happening? The author suggests that they would have learned this "either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us." "By spirit" means by prophecy. Someone in the community may have claimed to have learned by revelation that the day of the Lord was here. "By word" probably means by rational argument. Based on events going on in the

world, someone may have argued and persuaded others that they are in the end times. The third possibility, "a letter, as though from us," is the most intriguing.

- The author suggests that a false letter from Paul has convinced the believers that the day of the Lord is here. This is a very curious statement. If Paul himself wrote this letter, then he would be saying that already in his own lifetime, people were forging letters in his name. It's more likely that 2 Thessalonians was written after Paul's death, when indeed false letters by Paul were appearing. The author may even be trying to discredit 1 Thessalonians, which can be understood to be saying that the day of the Lord is very close.

- These ideas about the end of the current world order represent the essential difference between the two letters to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul says that the end will come soon, that there's no way you can tell precisely when, and therefore that the believers should always be ready. In 2 Thessalonians, the author says that the end is not imminent, that there will be visible signs that it is approaching, and therefore that the believers should concentrate on living ethically and working quietly to support themselves.

- Teachers of ancient Jewish and Christian eschatology could say both these things—you can't know when the end will come, and there will be signs that will tell you it's coming. Sometimes they said both these things in the same text. The two perspectives, then, are not necessarily contradictory. That's why some scholars believe that Paul could have written both letters. Nevertheless, the earlier reference to a forged letter and other stylistic issues seem to indicate that the author is not Paul.

- In 1 Thessalonians, Paul addressed believers who were distressed by social rejection from their neighbors and by the deaths of other believers. He assured them that Jesus was coming soon and exhorted them to be ready. In 2 Thessalonians, the author addressed believers who were distressed

by persecutions and by the fear that the day of the Lord was already happening. As such, he assured them that the events that must precede Jesus coming had not yet happened and exhorted them to go about their lives calmly.

Adaptation in Colossians

- Historians often study Colossians and Ephesians together because they are closely related literarily. Between one-quarter and one-half of the words in Ephesians are also in Colossians, and nearly all scholars agree that the author of Ephesians used Colossians in writing his text. As you might expect, the theologies of the two letters are fairly similar, but they appear to have been written for very different reasons.

- Colossae was a small and not very prominent city in western Asia Minor, but it was situated near other cities that had Christian communities, such as Laodicea. The founder of the Colossian congregation was not Paul, but almost certainly Epaphras, whom the author praises at the beginning and the end of the letter. Despite the good work of Epaphras, however, the author fears that the Colossians are being led astray by false teachers.

- The author of Colossians never explains clearly what the false teaching is; the letter's recipients presumably knew what he was talking about. The author complains that the philosophy of the false teachers focuses on what he calls "the elemental spirits of the universe" and encourages the Colossians to worship angels. The false teachers endorse visions and promote ascetic behaviors, such as celibacy or fasting. The author admits that the false teaching looks like wisdom, but says that it is misguided and merely human in origin.

- Historians debate what this false teaching might have been. Was it a form of Judaism? Was it Gnosticism? Was it a form of Stoic or Platonist philosophy? None of these hypotheses are fully convincing, but we can tell what upsets the author: The believers in Colossae think that, in addition to worshiping God and Jesus, they need to worship other cosmic powers, receive visions, and practice some form of asceticism. The author disagrees. In Christ, the believers have all that they need; anything else is superfluous or, worse, impious.

- Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians, developed the idea of the church as the body of Christ. Christ was not the head of the body; for Paul, Christ was the body. The author of Colossians, by contrast, makes the body of Christ a cosmic entity. Christ is the source and structure of all things, and he is the supreme head of his body, the church. This is a very high view of Christ's divinity, beyond even what we find in genuine letters of Paul such as Philemon and Philippians.

- This theology of baptism in Colossians also modifies Paul's teaching significantly. Although Paul taught that believers died and were buried with Christ in baptism, he insisted that they were not yet raised with Christ; they would have to wait for that to happen in the future. The author of Colossians stressed the present, encouraging believers not to think that they needed anything more than Christ, and to understand that baptism gave them their complete salvation in the present moment.

- The author of Colossians encourages believers to lead a conventional moral life, which is summarized in a household code at the end of chapter 3. No ancient person would have been surprised by what the household code in Colossians says: Wives should obey their husbands, children should obey their parents, and slaves should obey their masters. In turn, husbands should love their wives and not mistreat them, fathers should not provoke their children, and masters should treat their slaves justly and fairly.

- Paul would probably have found little to quarrel with here, except that he showed little enthusiasm for people getting married in the first place. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 7, Paul encouraged believers not to get married. They should be celibate, as he was, especially given that the present world was passing away. Only if they could not go without sex should the believers get married. In Colossians, however, a normal married life is the mark of true Christianity.

Unity in Ephesians

- Although English translations have Ephesians addressed "to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus," the best ancient manuscripts lack "in Ephesus" and simply read, "to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus." The author does not greet any recipient by name, nor are there any references to any particular issue that the recipients are facing. For these reasons, it is likely that this letter was never addressed to any specific church. It was a general letter, meant for all Christians who might profit from its message.

- The author of Ephesians used the letter to the Colossians, and so the two texts share many of the same ideas. Like Colossians, Ephesians says that believers have already been raised with Christ. As in Colossians, Christ is identified no longer with the body of the church; rather, he is the head of the body. But while the author of Colossians used these ideas to argue against the false teachings he saw in Colossae, the author of Ephesians uses them to emphasize the unity of the church and all humanity.

- In chapter 2 of Ephesians, the author stresses that Jesus has brought unity and reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. He assumes that his readers are Gentiles, and Gentiles were once far off from God, but in Christ, they

have been brought near. In verse 14, he explains that in Christ's flesh, "he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

- Unity in Christ between Jews and Gentiles is certainly a theme that would have pleased Paul, but the author of Ephesians goes on to say that Christ has "abolished the law," an idea that goes well beyond anything Paul says in the genuine letters. "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" Paul asked in Romans 3. "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." The author of Ephesians sees unity between Jews and Gentiles as complete, to the extent that the Jewish Law no longer comes into play.

- When Paul wrote his letters to individual congregations in Corinth or Thessalonica or Philippi, he emphasized the local and the personal. The author of Ephesians was writing to many Christians, dispersed in different congregations, and thus emphasized the universal and the general. We can see how the author's views differ from those of Paul, but we can see here also how Paul's theology of reconciliation and unity with Christ could grow far beyond those small groups of believers in the eastern Mediterranean.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Forged*.
Pervo, *The Making of Paul*.

JESUS AS THE SUFFERING SON OF MAN IN MARK

The author of the Gospel of Mark wrote during a tumultuous time—a time of warfare, suffering, and death—in which believers in Jesus had seen many of their key leaders die. Mark's message is that Jesus is indeed God's Son and Messiah, but that he came to suffer and die, to give his life for others. His death on the cross was a step toward the events that believers are now witnessing: the destruction of the Temple and Jesus's return as the Son of Man to bring God's kingdom. Believers can follow Jesus by serving others, trusting God, and preparing to suffer and die as he did.

The Milieu of Mark

- Around the year 70, believers in Jesus were living in a time of great crisis. During the 60s, many of the movement's leading figures had been killed. Christian tradition reports that Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome under the emperor Nero. Multiple sources claim that James, the brother of Jesus, was stoned to death in Jerusalem. The loss of these men must have dismayed any Christians who heard of their deaths.

- Paul had expected Jesus to return from heaven to begin the general resurrection and judgment during his own lifetime. But Paul was gone now, and Jesus had still not appeared. In the meantime, the Jesus movement had become increasingly made up of Gentiles—non-Jews—a puzzling development for a community that claimed that Jesus was the Messiah of the Jewish God, the promised King of the Jews.

- Above all, Judea and Galilee were plagued by warfare. Some Jews had long expressed discontent with Roman rule of the land they believed God had promised to them. Jews known as Zealots occasionally resisted with violence. Jewish prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus condemned the current world order as opposed to God's plan, and they proclaimed a coming kingdom of God, a replacement for the empire of the Romans.

- In the late 60s, a full-scale Jewish revolt emerged, with the aim of expelling the Romans from Judea and Galilee. By the year 70, the Romans were nearing victory. They besieged Jerusalem, and residents suffered from famine and widespread destruction. Eventually the Romans took the city and destroyed the Temple, which would never be rebuilt.

- It was in the midst of this chaos that an anonymous Christian wrote the earliest surviving account of Jesus's ministry and death, a work that we now call the Gospel of Mark. The author of this book does not identify

himself. Only later in the 2nd century would Christians guess that the author was named Mark and was a companion of Peter. While the author remains unknown, we will refer to him as Mark for convenience.

- Mark was very much aware of the tumultuous time in which he wrote. He embeds references to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple into his text, and he proclaims good news about Jesus for believers who are under stress, who have seen their leaders killed, and who are seeing their world engulfed in suffering and death.

- Mark's message for these Christians is clear: The kingdom of God is indeed at hand. Current events show this to be so. Suffering and death are what believers can anticipate in these days of tribulation. Jesus truly is God's Son, but his mission was to suffer and die for others. Following Jesus means suffering and dying as well. Believers nonetheless can have faith that Jesus, the Son of Man, will return to restore God's kingdom.

The Messianic Secret

- Mark tells the story of Jesus using a theme that scholars call the messianic secret. The characters we think should recognize Jesus's true identity and mission—his disciples, like Peter and James—do not. Instead, they consistently misunderstand Jesus and what being his disciple means. More marginal characters, like demons and even a Roman centurion, do understand who he is. Jesus himself tells people not to share his messianic identity, but speaks openly of suffering and death.

- When we read the Gospel of Mark, we have to remind ourselves that the other gospels—Matthew, Luke, and John—did not yet exist, and we have to be careful not to import into his narrative what we find in theirs. For example, Mark does not open with any account of Jesus's birth. Instead, he begins with John the Baptist encouraging people to repent

and baptizing them after they confess their sins. John tells them that someone more powerful than he is coming who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

- Then Jesus shows up, a full-grown man from Nazareth. He gets baptized, and Mark tells us that when he was coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. A voice tells him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Only Jesus sees the opening of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit. The voice addresses only Jesus, not anyone else who may have been there. This is a private revelation, for Jesus alone, not a general announcement of who Jesus is.

- This theme of concealment continues as Jesus begins his ministry. When he casts out a demon, the demon says to Jesus, "I know who you are, the Holy one of God!" Jesus tells the demon to be quiet, before casting him out. Mark 1:34 says that Jesus "cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." When Jesus cleanses a leper, he commands him not to tell anyone what he has done.

- In chapter 4, Jesus tells a series of parables; strangely, he tells the disciples that he does so to prevent people from understanding him. In verses 11 and 12, he says to the disciples:

> To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.

Here, Jesus suggests that the disciples do know something that others do not.

- In other passages, the disciples seem clueless about Jesus's true identity. After he stills a storm on the sea, the disciples ask one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Jesus later feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes and then walks on water. But the author tells us that the disciples "were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

- One of the disciples, Peter, finally figures out who Jesus is. He declares to Jesus, "You are the Messiah," after which, Mark says, Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." The pattern is clear: Jesus silences people who know his true identity as God's Holy One and Messiah, and he seems even to prevent people from understanding who he is.

- Mark made a deliberate choice to tell the story this way. If you read the Gospel of John, you'll find a very different picture. Jesus openly proclaims his divine identity to any who will listen: "I am the bread of life," he declares. "Before Abraham was, I am," he openly tells the Jews who doubt him. According to John's account, Jesus was not at all shy about proclaiming his divinity. Whatever the actual, historical Jesus really did, Mark has chosen to tell the story in this way.

- The first historian to recognize this theme, William Wrede, proposed that the messianic secret theme was chosen to solve a historical problem: Since Jesus had been crucified, his followers had been proclaiming him the Messiah and the Son of God. But, Wrede argued, Jesus himself never actually made this claim. Mark solves this contradiction by having Jesus acknowledge his messianic identity during his lifetime, but command people to keep it a secret until after his death.

- Later scholars proposed something of a variation on this hypothesis. They focused on the negative portrayal of the original disciples in Mark, especially Peter and James, noting that these two appear in the letters of Paul as apostles who came into conflict with Paul over his preaching to

Gentiles. Perhaps the author of Mark was an admirer of Paul, and that's why he chose to depict Paul's rivals negatively. These are both intriguing hypotheses, and it's possible that they both can be true.

The Son of Man

- Throughout his gospel, Mark emphasizes that Jesus's mission was to suffer and die and that his followers must be willing to do so as well. In chapter 8, Jesus begins to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by Jewish leaders, be killed, and rise again after three days. He tells his disciples, if you want to follow me, you have to take up your own cross. Those who want to gain their lives—that is, ensure their ultimate resurrection—must be willing to lose them for my sake.

- In chapter 9, Jesus a second time tells the disciples that he must suffer, be killed, and rise again. Mark says that the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." In fact, Jesus next learns that the disciples were arguing over which of them was the greatest. In response to this, Jesus tells them that whoever wants to be greatest among his followers must be willing to be the last of all and the servant of all. His disciples need to be vulnerable like children.

- In chapter 10, Jesus again tells the disciples about his coming suffering. This is when James and John ask to be seated on each side of Jesus, in his glory. Clearly James and John still have not learned what true discipleship means. Jesus asks James and John whether they are willing to drink the cup that Jesus must drink, and he predicts that in fact they will do so. This cup refers to suffering and death, as we learn later, in chapter 14. Jesus goes on to tell James, John, and the other disciples that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. So, too, they must be servants to each other.

- In chapter 13, Jesus tells the disciples that the buildings of Jerusalem will be destroyed. As the kingdom of God nears, there will be warfare, earthquakes, and famines. Followers of Jesus will be betrayed by family and friends and arrested. But these events are part of God's plan, leading to the arrival of the Son of Man on clouds of heaven to inaugurate God's kingdom, just as predicted in the Book of Daniel.

- Writing during the Jewish War, around the year 70, Mark believed that Jesus would come as the Son of Man and bring the kingdom very soon. In Mark 9:1, Jesus says to his gathered followers, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

Suggested Reading

Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 3.
Rhoads and Dewey, *Mark as Story*.
Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*.

JESUS AS THE NEW MOSES IN MATTHEW

Each gospel writer told the story of Jesus in a way that would communicate the theological message that he believed his community needed to hear. The unknown Christian who wrote what we call the Gospel of Matthew wanted to emphasize the divine nature of Jesus and show how the disciples gradually came to have stronger faith in him. Matthew also presents Jesus as a new Moses who fulfills the biblical law and the messages of the prophets.

The Synoptic Problem

- The gospel authors were less like newspaper reporters and more like preachers, getting their followers to believe in and follow Jesus as best they could in their unique circumstances. Nevertheless, the gospels are very similar to one another. For example, the words of Matthew and Mark in Greek match up precisely in several verses. From this, nearly all historians agree that the author of Matthew used Mark, copying much of it while changing some parts and making his own additions.

- All four of the gospels in the New Testament share the same basic structure. Each is mostly or entirely devoted to the ministry of Jesus in the final years of his life, roughly from when he was baptized by John the Baptist to when he was crucified and rose again. Each devotes a disproportionate amount of space to Jesus's last days, his arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem. And they contain a fair number of similar stories: not only Jesus being baptized by John, but also Jesus feeding large numbers of people, healing people, teaching his disciples and the crowds, and coming into conflict with Jewish leaders.

- Three of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are much more like each other than they are like John. These three gospels share many of the same stories and teachings, which they often narrate in the same order and using the same words. In fact, these gospels are so similar that they can, and are, easily placed in parallel columns next to one another in a book called a synopsis, from a Greek word that means "see together." For this reason, they are called the Synoptic Gospels.

- The Gospel of John does not overlap very much with the Synoptic Gospels, and it practically never uses the same words. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tends to speak in short, easily separated little nuggets of wisdom, like parables. In John, however, Jesus gives long and carefully constructed speeches, and he engages in extended dialogues with people. For these reasons and more, we set John apart from the Synoptic Gospels.

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- One of the earliest scholars to consider this issue was Augustine of Hippo, one of Christianity's greatest theologians, who died in 430. Augustine argued that the Synoptic Gospels were written in the order that they appear in the New Testament: Matthew wrote first, Mark used Matthew

to write his gospel, and Luke used both Matthew and Mark. Thanks to Augustine's great authority in the church, this view prevailed until the modern period.

- Today, historians agree that Mark was the earliest gospel. Mark is much shorter than Matthew and Luke, and no one has come up with a good explanation for why Mark would have cut out material that appears in the other gospels. For example, both Matthew and Luke have Jesus teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer, which does not appear in Mark. Why would Mark omit the prayer that Jesus told his followers to pray? In addition, it seems clear that the order of events in Mark is the basis for the plot used in Matthew and Luke.

- For good theological reasons, Mark tends to present Jesus as mysterious, a figure that practically no one understands, and depicts the disciples as uncomprehending. But this was an unsatisfying picture to later Christians, who made Jesus more clearly divine and the disciples better followers. This kind of change makes more sense than the idea that Mark took some of the more inspiring stories of Jesus and flattened them.

- Scholars are less unanimous on the question of whether Matthew was aware of or borrowed from Luke, or vice versa. Most say no, with a minority believing that Luke used Matthew. Matthew and Luke differ greatly in their additions to the beginning and end of the story of Jesus, and the two gospels never show word-for-word correspondences in this material. In some areas, however, like the Lord's Prayer, we find that Matthew and Luke mostly do have the exact same Greek words. Copying must have occurred.

- If Matthew did not read Luke, and Luke did not read Matthew, how could copying have happened? Scholars have concluded that there must have been a now-lost text in Greek that included the sayings that both

Matthew and Luke used. Since the mid-19th century, scholars have called this hypothetical source Q. The name probably comes from the German word *quelle*, meaning "source," although we don't know that for sure.

- A minority of scholars argue that there was no Q and that Luke used Matthew, which would explain why they both include teachings such as the Lord's Prayer. If that happened, then we don't need to hypothesize any lost documents like Q. There are significant technical arguments in support of this view. A question remains, however: If Luke used Matthew, copying passages like the Lord's Prayer word for word, why would he seemingly ignore Matthew's account of other key events, like the story of Jesus's birth?

- These issues matter because if we know what sources an author used, we can see how the author adapted and revised those sources and better understand what the author wanted to communicate. So there's a lot to be gained in understanding Matthew and Luke by comparing them with their source, Mark, and less to be gained by comparing Matthew and Luke.

The Divinity of Jesus

- Matthew begins by providing a genealogy of Jesus, a list of names that ties Jesus back to Abraham. Indeed, he identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the son of David, and the son of Abraham. In Matthew, Jesus is the heir of these men with whom God made important covenants, the covenants that were the basis for God's relationship with the people of Israel.

- When Joseph considers separating from Mary after she is discovered to be pregnant, an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him that Mary has conceived a son by the Holy Spirit. The angel gives the baby the name

Jesus. The angel says that this name means that Jesus will save people from their sins. Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua, which is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "to save."

- Matthew gives Jesus another name as well. He applies to Jesus Isaiah 7:14, in which a promised son is called Emmanuel. This, the author says, means "God is with us." These two names—Jesus and Emmanuel—identify Jesus as the presence of God—God with us—and as the one who saves people from their sins.

- Throughout his gospel, Matthew highlights Jesus's divine identity and his mission to save people. In chapter 14, he depicts Jesus walking on water, a story that is also found in Mark. Matthew adds to Mark's account Peter's request to walk toward Jesus on the water himself. When Peter gets frightened and begins to sink, he cries out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus saves him, fitting Matthew's theme of Jesus as savior. Moreover, at the end of the story, the disciples worship Jesus, proclaiming, "Truly you are the son of God." In contrast with their depiction in Mark, the disciples in Matthew recognize and acknowledge Jesus's divine identity.

- In chapter 21, Matthew gives his account of Jesus's disruption of activity in the Temple in Jerusalem. Mark depicts this incident as a judgment against the Temple, a prediction of its destruction by the Romans. Matthew, however, makes the incident more like how it's traditionally known—a cleansing. Jesus removes the buyers and sellers, but the story does not end there. Blind and lame people come to Jesus in the Temple, and he cures them. Children praise him as the son of David. He returns the next day and begins teaching.

- Likewise, in Matthew, the angel tells Joseph that the name Jesus means not merely that Jesus saves people, but that he saves people from their sins. In chapter 26, Jesus, as he does in Mark and Luke, celebrates the Last Supper with his disciples, and he tells them that the bread and wine are his body and blood. Only in Matthew, however, does Jesus specify

that his blood saves people from their sins. The wine, he says, "is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

- A significant feature of the birth story in Matthew is how often the author quotes the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, to show how Jesus's life fulfills a prophecy or something else that has been written. Matthew quotes such passages five times in the gospel's first two chapters alone. In three of these citations, he repeats a similar formula, saying, "This happened to fulfill what was spoken or written." Scholars call this Matthew's fulfillment citation formula. There are a total of 14 such instances in the gospel.

- This emphasis on Jesus's fulfillment of Jewish prophecy occasionally has somewhat comic results. As in the other gospels, Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly before his arrest, hailed by people waving tree branches. Only in Matthew, however, does Jesus somehow ride two animals at once. The disciples bring Jesus a donkey and a colt, they put their cloaks on the animals, and Jesus sits on them. This is intended to fulfill a composite of two passages, Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9, which Matthew quotes: "Tell the daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

- Matthew felt that it was necessary to stress as strongly as possible that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, the fulfillment of Jewish tradition. Jesus himself stresses this in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill."

- Why did Matthew want to emphasize this point so strongly? Most historians believe that Matthew wrote his gospel sometime in the 80s, a decade or two after the destruction of the Jewish Temple. By that time, more and more Christians were Gentiles, non-Jews. Matthew was probably responding to fellow Christians who did not see the value of the

Old Testament after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was probably also responding to Jews who did not believe in Jesus and who argued that Jesus was not the Messiah.

The New Moses

- One of the most famous incidents in Matthew is the escape of baby Jesus from King Herod. According to Matthew, wise men from the east follow a star to Judea and visit Herod, the Jewish puppet king. Herod learns that there's a prophecy that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. He

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orders that all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem be killed. But an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt. There they wait for Herod to die, after which they return from Egypt and settle in Nazareth.

- Any astute reader would recognize parallels with the story of baby Moses in the book of Exodus. There the Egyptian pharaoh orders the killing of baby Hebrew boys, but Moses is miraculously saved. He later leads the Hebrew people from Egypt to the promised land. In Matthew, Jesus not only fulfills Jewish law and prophecy—he's also a second Moses. It was through Moses that God gave the Jews the Law, and in Matthew's view, it's Jesus who rightly teaches the Law that Moses brought.

- There are other hints of this idea in the remainder of the gospel. In Matthew, Jesus delivers his teaching in five major speeches. These five speeches of Jesus recall the five books of the Bible that Moses was believed to have written: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the five books of the Pentateuch. The first of Jesus's five speeches occurs on a mountain. We know it as the Sermon on the Mount. Moses, of course, received the Law on a mountain, Mount Sinai.

- Matthew also ends his gospel with Jesus on a mountain, echoing Moses's death on Mount Nebo, overlooking the Promised Land. At the very end of Matthew, the 11 remaining disciples gather to meet the risen Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. There they worship him as the Son of God. Jesus sends them out to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them, and to teach people everything that he has commanded them. Jesus calls his teachings commandments, just as Moses brought the commandments of the Law.

Suggested Reading

Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 4.
Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*.

THE CHURCH IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

From ancient times, Christians have recognized that the Gospel of Matthew takes the most interest in how the church, the community of Jesus believers, should live and be organized. The church is a consistent topic in the letters of Paul; among the gospels, however, only Matthew mentions it directly. Matthew occurs first in the New Testament most likely because Christians found it so useful, even practical, in guiding their communities.

Trained Scribes

- Matthew's interest in forming and leading the church shapes his gospel in several ways. He portrays the original disciples as trained scribes who learned what Jesus taught and could pass it on to their followers. Jesus bestows on his disciples and the church the authority to forgive sins and instructs them on promoting discipline in a community of both saints and sinners. And Matthew presents Jesus and his disciples as the true teachers of the Jewish Law—not the Jewish leaders, whom he depicts as collaborators in Jesus's death.

- When he wrote his gospel, Matthew inherited from his source, the Gospel of Mark, a less-than-flattering depiction of the disciples. In that gospel, the disciples never really understand Jesus, who at one point berates them as blind and as having hardened hearts. Readers of Mark may have known that the disciples later proved to be brave preachers of the Christian message, but this is not reflected in Mark. In contrast, Matthew shows the disciples' recognition of Jesus's divine identity and growing understanding of his teaching.

- In both Mark and Matthew, Jesus warns the disciples, "Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." In Mark, the disciples think that Jesus is talking about literal bread, and this prompts Jesus to criticize the disciples as blind and hardened in their hearts. In Matthew as well, the disciples at first think that Jesus is talking about bread, but after Jesus asks them a series of leading questions, they get the idea. "Then they understood," Matthew writes, "that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." In Matthew, the disciples learn and understand.

- Similarly, in chapter 13 of Matthew, Jesus tells a series of parables. At first, the disciples do not understand what Jesus means, and they ask him about one parable in particular: "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." Jesus explains it, then tells three more parables. He asks

the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They say yes. Jesus then declares, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

- In other words, Jesus has successfully trained the disciples as scribes, men who are knowledgeable in the Scripture and in his own teachings. They will be able to share the treasures of their knowledge with others. At the end of the gospel, Jesus sends the disciples into the world to make new disciples and to teach them everything that Jesus has commanded. The disciples are the educated, trustworthy links between Jesus and the later members of the church.

Saints and Sinners

- Matthew doesn't present the disciples as perfect, however; they sometimes falter in their faith and have doubts. When Jesus walks on water, Peter asks Jesus if he can come to Jesus across the water. This shows that Peter understands that Jesus has divine power. Nonetheless, when the wind becomes strong, Peter becomes frightened and begins to sink. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus rescues Peter and asks him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

- Several times Jesus describes the disciples as having little faith. They need to have more confidence in him as their savior and as the Son of God. This persists even to the end of the gospel. When the disciples meet the risen Jesus on a mountain, Matthew says that the disciples worshiped Jesus, but that some doubted. The disciples may be trained scribes, but they sometimes lack sufficient faith in their teacher.

- In this respect, the disciples do not differ from other Christians, as Matthew presents things. On the one hand, Matthew has Jesus make clear that he expects perfection from his followers. In the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus tells his listeners that their righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to fulfill them—or, it seems, to make the Law even more difficult to follow. If the law says you should not commit murder, Jesus says you should not even get angry with a brother or sister. If the law says you should not commit adultery, Jesus says you should not even look at someone else with lust in your heart. At the end of chapter 5, Jesus sums up: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

- On the other hand, Matthew understands that the followers of Jesus will not be perfect. That's the message of the Parable of the Weeds, which is found in chapter 13 and appears only in Matthew. As Jesus explains later, the Parable of the Weeds is an allegory; it suggests that in the church, there are going to be righteous people and sinners, and that's how it needs to be. Only at the end of time, at the last judgment, will the good and the bad be separated. Human beings should not try to make this separation in the meantime.

- Matthew emphasizes that there needs to be both forgiveness and discipline within the church. How can the church balance these seemingly conflicting requirements? Jesus provides a formal procedure for dealing with problem church members: If a church member sins against you, first talk to the sinner privately. If the person doesn't listen to you, bring along two or three other members for a second conversation. If that doesn't

work, the sinful member should be brought before the entire church. If the person still refuses to repent, then the church is empowered to expel the member.

- Nevertheless, Jesus ends his speech with exhortations to forgiveness. Peter asks how often he should forgive a brother who sins against him, and Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." He then tells a parable about a slave whose master forgives him a large debt. When that slave refuses to show the same mercy to a fellow slave who owes him money, the master reverses course and orders that the unforgiving slave be tortured until he pays the debt. Jesus warns that God will do the same to Christians if they do not forgive one another.

True Teachers

- The author of Matthew views the Christian church as a community of righteousness. In Matthew, Jesus calls his followers to a more perfect righteousness, a righteousness that's based on the Law, but also deepens it. If the Law forbids murder, Jesus forbids even hatred. If the Law says you should pray, Jesus tells you precisely how, in the Lord's Prayer. If the Law says you should fast, Jesus tells you to do it discreetly and not display your piety to others.

- Matthew contrasts Jesus with other teachers of the Law, especially the scribes and Pharisees. In chapter 23, Jesus tells his followers that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses's seat, and that they do in fact teach the Law rightly. But he criticizes them as hypocrites who care more about gaining respect from others than about actually being righteous. Jesus tells his disciples that they should not have titles like rabbi, father, or teacher, because they should look to the one father, God, and to the one teacher and rabbi, Jesus himself.

- This is one of the distinctive themes or even paradoxes of the Gospel of Matthew. On the one hand, Matthew takes great pains to show that Jesus is the culmination of Jewish tradition. On the other hand, Matthew displays hostility to the Jews and portrays them in a harsher manner than did his source, the Gospel of Mark. He displays bitterness about the fact that so few Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

- In two parables in chapters 21 and 22, Matthew charges the Jews with killing Jesus. All historians agree that this is a baseless charge. Only Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, could have sentenced Jesus to death. Nonetheless, Matthew tells the story of Jesus's trial and crucifixion in a way that shifts the blame from Pilate to the Jews. This was a trend that had already started in Mark, but Matthew takes it to a higher level.

- How are we to explain all this? Matthew is telling the story of Jesus in a way that addresses the situation that his fellow Christians faced in the decades after the destruction of the Temple. The Christian church was growing slowly, but it was made up mostly of Gentiles, non-Jews. They were showing faith in Jesus as God's Messiah, while nearly all Jews were not.

- Meanwhile, Judaism was changing as well. With the destruction of the Temple, Jewish worship of God could no longer be centered around sacrifices to the Lord. The Sadducees, the priests who ran the Temple, lost their positions of authority. Instead, Jews focused their religious lives around the synagogues, where they prayed, sang hymns, and studied the Law and the prophets under learned teachers.

- The movement of the Pharisees emerged as a leading force in this period. Even before the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees had urged their fellow Jews to devote themselves to studying and following the Law. Now the Pharisees' message was even more compelling, and their leading scholars and teachers were becoming known as rabbis. The Gospel of Matthew, then, originated in a context of competition regarding who should guide people in following the Jewish tradition after the destruction of the Temple.

- Matthew wanted to reassure his Christian community that they were following God's Messiah and Son, and he wanted perhaps to persuade unbelieving Jews to turn away from their rabbis and scribes and instead to follow Jesus, the true teacher of righteousness. Matthew looks forward to a time when he hopes these separated communities—Jews and Gentiles, those who believe in Jesus and those who do not—will join together in worship of their shared God.

Suggested Reading

Riches, *Matthew*.
Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*.

LUKE AND ACTS ON GOD'S HISTORY OF SALVATION

The Gospel of Luke is the first book of a two-volume work that scholars call Luke-Acts. By far the longest single piece of literature in the New Testament, Luke-Acts tells a grand story, from the births of Jesus and John the Baptist to the arrival in Rome of the Apostle Paul—a history of events that spanned about six decades. Luke-Acts presents not merely a gospel, an account of Jesus's ministry and death, but also the first history of the Christian movement.

An Orderly Account

- Matthew and Mark don't use the term "Christians" to refer to themselves or the movement of Jesus believers. But Luke does use that term, which first shows up in Acts, chapter 11. Luke's preferred term for what we call Christianity is actually "the Way," and he suggests that "Christians" was a term first used by outsiders to label Jesus followers.

- Still, the appearance of the name shows that Luke thinks of the Jesus movement as a distinct group, separate from Judaism. It's a movement that now deserves its own history. Most scholars date Luke-Acts somewhere between the years 90 and 120. By this time, the author—whose name is not known, but whom we will refer to as Luke for convenience—could look back at how much had happened since Jesus was born.

- In the opening sentence of the gospel, Luke acknowledges that he is not the first person to write about these things. "Many," Luke says, "have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us." Luke has used these previous writings and thoroughly investigated everything for himself to create his own orderly account.

- Luke presents himself as a historian, someone who has sources and critically analyzes them to present his own narrative. His reference to "many" such writers is probably an exaggeration, but most likely there were more than we know about. We can identify two of Luke's sources—the Gospel of Mark and the hypothetical lost document Q. Mark provided Luke with the basic plot of his first volume, from Jesus's baptism to his resurrection, and Q contained teachings of Jesus that Mark did not have, like the Lord's Prayer.

- We can't really identify any of Luke's other sources because we don't have any additional earlier texts to use as comparisons, though we might be able to discern a possible source toward the end of Acts. In the last chapters, Luke recounts Paul's sea voyage to Rome. At times, he uses the first-person plural, "we," as if he was also on the trip. That's highly unlikely, so this "we" language might be an indication that Luke is using an earlier account by someone who did claim to be on the ship. This is just speculation, however.

- Because we have one of Luke's sources, the Gospel of Mark, we can see how Luke uses it. For the most part, Luke follows Mark closely and doesn't make many changes. He does omit a large section, from Mark 6:45 through Mark 8:27, perhaps thinking that it did not contribute to the narrative he wanted to tell.

A Unified History

- Luke's writing resembles that of Mark and Matthew in the sections where they overlap, but where Luke does his own writing, he's more sophisticated. He intertwines stories, such as the births of Jesus and John the Baptist in the opening chapters of Luke. In Acts, we find extended scenes with real drama, such as Paul's shipwreck in chapter 28, and even moments of comic relief. Moreover, Luke works to give an overall unity to his sprawling two-volume history, which totals 52 chapters.

- One way Luke unifies his work is by creating a geographical movement to and from Jerusalem. In Luke, Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee, well to the north of Jerusalem. He then travels through Samaria, toward Jerusalem. The last seven chapters of Luke are set in Jerusalem. Acts then opens with the disciples still in Jerusalem. Then the apostles are

shown moving from Jerusalem into Samaria, making Jesus's journey in reverse. In the remainder of Acts, the gospel spreads further, until Paul reaches Rome.

- The two volumes also share parallel events. At the beginning of Luke, the Holy Spirit descends on Mary, and Jesus is born. At the beginning of Acts, the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles, and the church is born. Likewise, both Luke and Acts include major trial scenes: Toward the end of Luke, Jesus appears before a Jewish council and then before the Roman governor Pilate. Toward the end of Acts, Paul appears before a Jewish council and then before the Roman governor Festus.

- Several important themes of Luke-Acts appear in a sermon by Jesus in chapter 4 of Luke: Jesus presents himself as a prophet, a successor to Isaiah. He's a faithful Jew who attends the synagogue and preaches there. The Holy Spirit is upon him. He has a special mission to the poor and oppressed. And all this fulfills Scripture.

- At one point, Jesus describes incidents in which the prophets brought their message to Gentiles, not to Jews. This is another major theme of Luke-Acts. When Luke was writing in the late 1st or early 2nd century, nearly all Christians were Gentiles, even though Jesus was a Jewish prophet and he and his followers were faithful Jews. As Luke presents it, Jews rejected Jesus's message, so Jesus and his apostles turned to Gentiles instead.

- In Luke, Jesus talks about himself fulfilling Scripture, specifically a prophecy from Isaiah. In Acts, Peter talks about Jesus fulfilling Scripture—in this case, prophecies from David in the Psalms. Using parallel scenes like these, Luke not only crafts his two volumes into one book; he also reiterates his primary theological ideas and shows how God's history of salvation continues from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the apostles.

Past, Present, and Future

- In Luke's view, events don't simply happen; they are directed by God through his Holy Spirit. Throughout history, God leads people to salvation through men called prophets, with the chief prophet being Jesus. That history can be divided into three general time periods: the time of the Hebrew prophets, from the beginning of Israel through John the Baptist; the time of Jesus; and the time of the church, when the apostles live out the message of Jesus and look forward to Jesus's return to establish his kingdom.

- With this scheme in mind, it's no surprise that Luke gives special consideration to the transition from one period to the other. For example, he devotes a lot of attention to John the Baptist in order to make clear the transition from the time of the prophets to the time of Jesus. Clues in Luke identify John as a prophet in the tradition of the prophets of Israel, the last in a long line that goes back at least to Samuel.

- In the first two chapters of Luke, three characters deliver prophetic hymns or poems. These reflect some of Luke's central themes: God's interest in the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed; the fulfillment of prophecy; and the salvation of Gentiles. Just as important as their content, however, is the style of these speeches: In Greek, they sound a lot like the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. They allude to and draw their language from numerous biblical passages. In other words, they belong to the time of the prophets. These chapters are transitional, mixing the Old Testament with the new Gospel of Luke.

- To bring his two-volume history from the time of the prophets and the time of Jesus to the time of the church, Luke composes stories in which Peter and the other apostles share in the prophetic power of Jesus and the earlier prophets. If the Old Testament prophets are like previews of

Jesus, Peter and the apostles are like remakes, or reminders, of Jesus. The prophets looked forward to Jesus, and the apostles look back to Jesus, as they bring the message of his future salvation of the world.

Suggested Reading

Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*.
Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 5.
Powell, *What Are They Saying about Acts?*
———, *What Are They Saying about Luke?*

LUKE'S INCLUSIVE MESSAGE

In the two-volume work that is Luke-Acts, Luke constructs a history of salvation that spans centuries. To go with this big picture of history, Luke has an expansive, inclusive vision of God's salvation: Jesus came to save the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed, women and men. His message of repentance and forgiveness knows no national or ethnic boundaries, and applies not just to ordinary sinners, but to people who are seemingly beyond forgiveness.

Rich and Poor

- All early Christian writings encourage charity to the poor, and they all invite poor people to receive the gospel message. But Luke makes this a central theme of his book, and he makes his interest in the poor clear at the outset. It's only in Luke that the baby Jesus must be laid in a manger because there's no room in the inn. And the first visitors to the infant Jesus are not exotic wise men from the east, as in Matthew, but rather lowly shepherds. They're the first to hear the good news.

- In the rest of the gospel, Jesus brings good news to the poor and outcast, and he tells rich people to share their possessions. In Acts, the early Christians live out that vision by sharing their possessions with the poor and each other. Luke tells us that the believers retained no individual private property, but they held everything in common. They would sell their individual possessions and give the proceeds to the apostles, who distributed them to those who had need.

- In Luke, chapter 6, we find the famous Beatitudes—Jesus's list of blessings—which also appear in Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, Jesus blesses "the poor in spirit" and "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." In Luke, however, Jesus blesses simply "the poor" and those who are "hungry." And unlike Matthew, Luke has Jesus follow his blessings with a set of "woes" for other people, the first of which is "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." In the following verses, we find Jesus condemning lending money at interest, which was a great burden on the poor.

- In Luke, chapter 14, Jesus finds himself at a dinner party, and he notices that the guests are all trying to get the best seats. Jesus suggests that instead of jockeying for the best places, guests should sit at the lowest place, so that the host will move them up, rather than sit in a high place

and get moved down. And he tells the host that he should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They won't return the favor, but the host will be blessed and will receive a reward at the resurrection.

- Notice that Jesus does not tell rich people to feed the hungry and poor purely out of love. There will be a reward, he says. If you take a lower seat at a dinner party, the host will give you a higher one. If you invite poor people to your own dinner, you'll get your reward at the resurrection.

Lost Sinners

- Another important teaching of Luke is that Jesus came to seek out and save the lost. That is, Jesus brings forgiveness not just for ordinary sinners, but for people who seem to lie outside the religious community, people you might give up on, people who are not just imperfect, but who are truly lost.

- We find this idea in a series of parables in chapter 15 of Luke. When a bunch of tax collectors and other sinners gather around Jesus, some Pharisees grumble about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. Jesus responds with parables about the joy of seeking and finding what is lost—a shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep to find one lost sheep, a woman who lights a lamp and sweeps her house to find a single lost coin. These examples emphasize the effort that goes into seeking the lost.

- These short anecdotes lead to another of Luke's most famous parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's the story of a young man who takes his inheritance from his father early, goes off to live in a foreign country, squanders all his money in dissolute living, and ends up having to work by feeding pigs food, food that he would be glad to eat himself. The son figures he can go home and work for his father as a hired hand, but as he nears the house, the father runs to meet his son. The son confesses his

sinfulness and declares himself unworthy of being his father's son. But the father does not condemn the wayward son. Instead, he throws a party and kills a fatted calf for a feast. His son who was dead is now alive; the one who was lost is found.

- Of course, there's another son, the good son, who has stayed with his father and has done everything that was expected of him. He resents all this feasting for his sinful brother. He's never been given even a modest party, much less one with a fatted calf. The father tells the good son, "All that is mine is yours," but a celebration is necessary for the lost one who has been found. The father's love is not a zero-sum game. There's enough for everyone, especially the righteous folks. But the return of the lost sinner deserves a true celebration.

©Bartolomé Esteban Murillo/The Return of the Prodigal Son/Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

- In chapter 7, Jesus is once again having dinner, this time at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. A woman who is a known sinner shows up. She weeps over Jesus's feet, then dries them and anoints them with an ointment. Simon the Pharisee objects that a true prophet would not let such a sinner do this. But Jesus says that because this woman has been forgiven so much, she shows great love, while Simon had not shown Jesus such affection. "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little," Jesus says to the Pharisee. But to the woman he says, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Luke and Women

- Luke's expansive vision of the Christian message includes women as well as men. Women appear in his gospel much more prominently than in the others of the New Testament, and that prominence continues in Acts. It begins in the first chapters of the gospel, where the main characters are Mary and Elizabeth. Mary's importance becomes clear when you compare Luke's birth story with the one in Matthew. Where Matthew focuses on Joseph, Luke clearly chose to focus on Mary.

- Female characters populate both Luke and Acts as followers of Jesus and members of the community. Notably, however, Luke balances his message of inclusion of women with careful definition of their proper roles in the church. The letters of Paul, written in the decade of the 50s, show women performing all sorts of leadership roles in his congregations—they are deacons, prophets, colleagues, and patrons. Paul even calls a woman, Junia, "prominent among the apostles."

- Luke wrote 40 or more years after Paul, and he does not think of women playing all these roles. As he presents it, only men can be apostles, a group limited to the original 12 disciples of Jesus, plus maybe Paul. In the first chapter of Acts, Luke lists the 11 apostles—without Judas, of course—

and then says that there were also certain women around. Peter then announces that Judas must be replaced and that the new apostle must be "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us."

- Consider some of the women who appear in the ministry of Jesus, starting with the sinful woman who anoints Jesus in Luke, chapter 7. Luke got the basics of that story from Mark, chapter 14. But in Mark, the woman is not identified as a sinner, and the meaning of her action is prophetic. Jesus says that she is anointing his body beforehand for burial. In Mark, the woman is one of the few characters who understand that Jesus must die, and she acts like a prophet in signifying that by her action. In Luke, by contrast, the woman is not a prophet, but a repentant sinner—a notable demotion, so to speak.

- What should women do, according to Luke? For one thing, they should support the church financially. At the beginning of chapter 8, Luke names some women who were following Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. He then says that many other women "provided for them out of their resources." In other words, women who had sufficient resources supported Jesus and his movement financially and in other ways. In line with this, many of the female characters that appear in Acts are women of high status who are able to support the Christian community as patrons.

Cultural Differences

- You may think of the Christian message as opposed to the teachings of pagan philosophy and religion, but Luke does not see it in quite that way. In Acts, chapter 17, Paul stands before the Areopagus, a famous hill in Athens, and gives a speech that presents the Christian God as what paganism was looking for, even if pagans did not know it. Paul quotes the somewhat obscure poets Epimenides and Aratus in support of his argument. Converting to Christianity, according to Luke, does not mean rejecting traditional philosophy and religion; it means embracing the culmination of traditional philosophy and religion.

- But wasn't Christianity a subversive religion, one that opposed the Roman Empire? Wasn't Jesus crucified as a false king? Luke has an answer for that as well. Throughout his two volumes, Roman governors find that Christians are not at all a danger to good order. Instead, Christians get in trouble on technicalities or for other reasons. This pattern applies to the trial and execution of Jesus in Luke, chapter 23. Pontius Pilate repeatedly says that he finds no reason for punishing Jesus: "He has done nothing to deserve death," Pilate says more than once. It's only because of the crowd's insistent yelling that Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

- In Luke, Jesus's crucifixion seems to be one big mistake on the part of the Romans. Indeed, even Jesus himself prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." One of the robbers crucified with Jesus states that he and the other thief are getting what they deserve, but Jesus has done nothing wrong. And just in case you miss the point, when Jesus finally dies, there's a Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross. In Mark, that centurion says, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Not so in Luke, where he says, "Certainly this man was innocent."

- In Luke and Acts, Jesus and his followers are simply not a threat to Rome. This may be why Luke ends his history with Paul in Rome awaiting trial, rather than with Paul's execution. The gospel made it to Rome; that's the important thing. When you read Luke and Acts, you get a sense of the expansive, inclusive vision that led Christians to spread their message across the Roman Empire and beyond. The Christianity of today, diverse and worldwide, is precisely what Luke had in mind.

Suggested Reading

Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*.
Kreamer and D'Angelo, *Women & Christian Origins*, chap. 8.
Powell, *What Are They Saying about Acts?*
———, *What Are They Saying about Luke?*

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THE APOSTLES AND CHURCH IN LUKE AND ACTS

In Luke-Acts, the combined gospel and history of the Christian movement, Luke uses narrative to convey a theological vision of the church in which God guides the community of believers through the Holy Spirit. The church portrayed in Luke-Acts is not a haphazard collection of uncoordinated missions, but a harmonious movement, based in Jerusalem and led by apostles who were living links to Jesus and witnesses to all that he said and did. In this way, Luke assures his readers that the church to which they belong presents the gospel truly, as it has been taught from the beginning.

Initial Confusion

- Because the apostles are so important to providing continuity from the time of Jesus to the time of the church, Luke gives considerable care to showing how they are qualified to preach and teach. This was something of a challenge for him, however, because his primary source for understanding the disciples of Jesus during his lifetime was the Gospel of Mark.

- Mark had portrayed the disciples—including Peter, James, and other important figures—as obtuse. They repeatedly fail to see who Jesus really is, even when he walks on water and feeds thousands of people. When Jesus tells them that he must suffer and die, they refuse to believe him. When Jesus is arrested, they run away, and even the women who find the empty tomb fail to do what the young man in the tomb tells them to do.

- Mark's depiction of the original disciples was not flattering, but it served a profound theological message. Mark wrote in the midst of the devastating Jewish War of the late 60s and early 70s, when Rome brutally suppressed a rebellion in Judea and eventually destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. Mark's picture of Jesus's followers as confused and uncertain probably matched the experiences of his readers.

- Mark's audience knew that Peter, James, and the other apostles eventually got their act together, preached the gospel, and even gave their lives for the Christian message. If the original followers of Jesus had eventually learned how to follow Jesus truly in discipleship and suffering, so could later Christians in a period of suffering and tumult.

- Luke needed to send a different message to his readers. He wanted to assure them that the Christian church to which they belonged stood on a firm foundation and could rely on the testimony of the original apostles. So Luke modifies Mark's picture of the disciples. As Luke presents them, the disciples indeed did not understand Jesus and his message at first, but

only because the full meaning was hidden from them by God until Jesus had risen from the dead, when Jesus could teach them the Scriptures and reveal the truth about all the events that they had witnessed. They could then go out and preach about Jesus based on the Scriptures.

- Consider Luke, chapter 9, which contains one of three instances in which Jesus predicts his future suffering. In Mark, also in chapter 9, after Jesus says that he will be betrayed and killed, Mark writes about the disciples, "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." Luke instead writes, "They did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying."

- Luke portrays the disciples as not understanding what Jesus was saying because of what must be a divine plan. God has hidden the truth from them until the proper time. That proper time is the period between Jesus's resurrection and his ascension into heaven 40 days later. That's the moment of transition between the time of Jesus and that of the church, and that's when the disciples receive their education in the Scriptures and in the meaning of Jesus.

Eventual Understanding

- Stories in which the risen Jesus enlightens the apostles and the other followers appear only in Luke. In the first, two disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus and discussing all that has happened. Jesus himself joins them, but they are prevented from recognizing him. The two recount recent events in a way that shows that they are not sure how to understand what has happened. Jesus then explains the Scriptures to them, beginning with Moses and the prophets, showing how it all refers

to him. That evening at dinner, he takes bread, blesses it, and gives it to them. At that moment, Luke says, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."

- What happened to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus happens for the whole group in the next scene. Jesus appears in the midst of his followers, and once again, at first they are confused and terrified. They think that Jesus is a ghost, but Jesus shows them that he has flesh and bones. The disciples still wonder and do not yet believe, until once again, Jesus eats in their presence, this time a fish. And once again, Jesus reminds the disciples of his words and explains to them the Scriptures.

- Luke phrases these instances of initial confusion and eventual understanding in the passive voice—during Jesus's lifetime, the meaning of what Jesus said was hidden from the disciples, and after the resurrection, their eyes were opened. This makes clear that the disciples were not responsible for this. It was God's doing, part of his divine plan that unfolds through history.

Ensuring Continuity

- In the book of Acts, Luke shows that God has continued to unfold his plan for history during the time of the church. The Holy Spirit continues to guide the apostles and their successors after Jesus has ascended into heaven. According to Luke's account, Peter and the other 11 apostles were fully in charge of the Christian mission, which they directed from their base in Jerusalem. There were very few conflicts among the early believers, and any that arose were settled in formal meetings, guided by the Holy Spirit.

- Modern historians agree that Luke's picture of the early years of the Christian movement is idealized. The letters of Paul are the only sources that we have that come directly from the years that Luke is talking about, and those letters present a different picture. In Paul's letters, we see a variety of Christian missionaries who did not necessarily coordinate their activities. The authority of Peter and the other original apostles did not go unquestioned. And there were plenty of conflicts, which were dealt with in a somewhat ad hoc fashion.

- To understand Luke's theology of the early church better, let's look at the best known controversy among the earliest Christians: whether Gentile believers had to convert to Judaism in order to be saved. More specifically, the question was whether they had to be circumcised, if they were men, and keep kosher. Paul discusses this problem at length in two of his letters, Galatians and Romans. In Galatians, Paul describes how the conflict over this question played out, and we can compare what he says with what Luke narrates in Acts.

- According to Paul in Galatians, God called him directly to preach the gospel among the Gentiles after Paul had persecuted Christians for some time. Paul says that after he received this call to be an apostle of Jesus, he did not go to Jerusalem or receive validation, so to speak, from any other apostle. After three years, he did go to Jerusalem and stay with Peter, and he met James, but Paul saw himself as an independent apostle, with a commission from God alone.

- Paul preached that Gentile believers should not become Jews by getting circumcised and following the Law. Instead, they are made righteous solely by their faith in Jesus. According to Paul, his gospel became an object of controversy some 17 years after he began preaching. Describing his meeting with Peter and James, Paul refers to the leaders in Jerusalem sarcastically as "acknowledged leaders," adding, "what they actually were makes no difference to me." He describes a meeting of equals.

- Consider how Luke narrates these same events in Acts. In chapter 9, Luke acknowledges that Paul—then named Saul—was recruited by God through a revelation. But after a brief period in Damascus, Paul goes to Jerusalem. There the believers are understandably wary of him, but Barnabas presents Paul to the apostles, and Paul then begins to preach. When Paul attracts opposition, the Jerusalem believers send Paul first to Caesarea and then to Tarsus. In other words, Paul went to Jerusalem soon after his conversion, checked in with the apostles there, and was sent off to other places. In Luke's account, Jerusalem is the headquarters.

- Paul disappears from the narrative in Acts for a while, and the focus returns to Peter. In chapter 15, Luke presents his account of the Jerusalem meeting that Paul described in Galatians. While Paul is present at this meeting, he's not really a participant—more of a material witness. It's Peter who defends the salvation of uncircumcised Gentiles, and it's James who proclaims that Gentile believers need not get circumcised and keep kosher. With the consent of the entire church, the apostles and elders send a committee, along with Paul, to inform the believers of this decision.

- You can see the differences between Luke's account in Acts and what Paul has said in Galatians. According to Luke, Peter—not Paul—is the leading advocate for including uncircumcised Gentiles in the movement. The meeting in Jerusalem is clearly not a meeting of equals. Paul is not one of the apostles and elders. Instead, he comes to the meeting to receive the counsel of the Jerusalem leaders. He reports to the meeting, but he does not participate in its decision-making. The result is an official decision declared by James, the brother of Jesus, and delivered to other Christians by emissaries from the apostles and elders.

- It's tempting at first to dismiss Luke's account in favor of Paul's. After all, Paul was actually there, and he wrote his Letter to the Galatians in the 50s, probably less than 10 years after the meeting in Jerusalem. Luke

was not there, and he wrote Acts 40 or more years after these events took place. Modern historians agree that Paul provides us with a better source in general.

- We must remind ourselves, however, that Paul was not a neutral observer. He was on one side of a conflict, and when he wrote Galatians, he was defending himself against critics who said that he was only a secondhand apostle, inferior to the other, original apostles. It's therefore likely that Paul exaggerates his own importance, and that the meeting in Jerusalem was not nearly as symmetrical as he claims. Luke is much later, but he has little stake in who was equal to whom, and he has complete respect for Paul, even if he does not see him as a real apostle.

- Although Luke clearly does not consider Paul an apostle equal to Peter and James, he nonetheless makes Paul the main character for the remainder of Acts. After the Jerusalem meeting, Peter disappears from the narrative, and James shows up only once more. Paul becomes the hero of the story. If the original apostles are so central to Luke's history as the connections from the time of Jesus to that of the church, why does he drop them halfway through Acts?

- One answer may be purely practical. Luke tells us that he relies on sources; maybe he did not have good evidence for Peter's career after the Jerusalem meeting. Perhaps his reliable sources all had to do with Paul. Consider also that Luke and his readers lived at a time when no original apostles remained. Paul represents continuity from the apostles to their successors. Luke shows that God continues to guide the church and its expansion through the Holy Spirit, even by means of new leaders like Paul.

Suggested Reading

Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*.
Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 5.
Powell, *What Are They Saying about Acts?*
———, *What Are They Saying about Luke?*

JESUS AS THE DIVINE WORD IN JOHN

The Gospel of John stands apart from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptic Gospels present different theologies and emphasize different themes, but most of the same stories appear in all three, and Jesus speaks in approximately the same way. In the Gospel of John, however, things look very different.

Signs and Symbols

- The Gospel of John probably comes from the 90s of the 1st century. Its author is anonymous, but we have some clues to who was behind it. The basic story of Jesus in John is the same as in the Synoptic Gospels, running from the ministry of John the Baptist to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But even the stories that also appear in the Synoptic Gospels look remarkably different in John.

- Two good examples of the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and John are Jesus's violent act in the Temple and his feeding of 5,000 people. In John, chapter 2, Jesus makes a trip to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He enters the Temple and sees people selling sacrificial animals and changing money. Jesus makes a whip, drives the animals out, and overturns the tables of the money changers.

- This incident is familiar from the Synoptic Gospels, but all of them place this event at the very end of Jesus's life. In those gospels, Jesus makes only one trip to Jerusalem, and it's the fatal one in which he is arrested, put on trial, and executed. In John, however, Jesus makes multiple trips to Jerusalem, and this violent act in the Temple occurs very early in his career.

- Both the Synoptic Gospels and John cite a Bible verse to understand what Jesus has done. In the Synoptics, the verse is Isaiah 56:7: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." In John, it's Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house will consume me." John makes the Temple incident a symbolic action about Jesus's death and resurrection; the act has a higher, more spiritual meaning than in the Synoptic Gospels. And in John, antagonism between Jesus and characters called "the Jews" begins early and runs throughout the gospel.

- In John, chapter 6, Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. Then the disciples get into a boat on the Sea of Galilee and see Jesus walking on the water. In Mark, too, this feeding miracle is connected with Jesus walking on the sea. In John, however, a long dialogue follows between Jesus, the crowd, and skeptics (again called "Jews") in which Jesus describes himself as the bread of life that has come down from heaven. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus does give long sermons, but they tend to be collections of short sections, not prolonged discussions of a single theme. John interprets events as symbolic actions with spiritual meanings.

- These two examples illustrate the distinctive nature of John's Gospel, how it stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels. Conflict between Jesus and persons called simply the Jews takes place from the start. Jesus talks in long speeches and dialogues, rather than in short parables and sound bites. Jesus's actions are signs, symbolic acts that point beyond themselves to higher theological truths. John has sometimes been called the spiritual gospel because it takes greater interest in theological meanings and spiritual concepts than do the Synoptics.

The Beloved Disciple

- John's sources are difficult to identify. It seems that the author used a book that collected some of Jesus's miracles and called them signs. When Jesus turns water into wine, the author says that this was "the first of his signs." When he heals an official's son, that action is numbered as "the second sign," even though the author has mentioned Jesus doing other

signs between these first and second signs. The reference to a "second sign" doesn't fit, and this may be an indication that it was part of an earlier book that the author used.

- Did the author of John have access to Matthew, Mark, or Luke? Historians have long argued about this question. Most modern scholars seem to think that the author probably had Mark and may have had one of the other Synoptic Gospels. At times, the author of John seems to allude to Mark without actually quoting it. With these exceptions, we don't know what sources the author of John may have had.

- Instead of focusing on sources, modern historians emphasize the particular Christian community to which the author of John belonged. These Christians appear to have developed a distinctive way of talking about Jesus and understanding his mission, and they had a distinctive history and experience, one that involved conflict with their fellow Jews. We can learn more about this community by exploring the composition of the gospel and an anonymous figure in it who is identified as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

- It seems clear that the Gospel of John was not all written at one time. At the end of chapter 20, we find these words:

> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

- This sounds like it should be the end of the gospel, but it is followed by another chapter. It seems probable that the chapter that follows, chapter 21, was added later. In fact, the style and vocabulary of chapter 21 differ enough from the first 20 chapters of the gospel that this seems very likely. The sentences at the end of chapter 20 may have originally concluded the book of signs that the author probably used.

- It's at the end of chapter 21, the end of the gospel as we now have it, that we find Peter asking Jesus about the nameless disciple called "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who's often referred to as the Beloved Disciple. The author says that he was the one who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper. From the conversation between Peter and Jesus, it seems clear that at the time chapter 21 was written, the Beloved Disciple had died.

- Then we read this statement:

> This—that is, the disciple whom Jesus loved—this is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

- Here, the Beloved Disciple is identified as the authority for what the gospel contains. The term "has written" probably does not refer to direct composition of the gospel as we have it—after all, chapter 21 makes clear that the Beloved Disciple is dead—but it does mean that he has composed things that went into the book in some way. The Beloved Disciple functions as this community's authoritative figure.

- At the beginning of chapter 20, when Mary Magdalene reports that Jesus's tomb is empty, Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to see it. The author repeats three times that the Beloved Disciple reached the tomb first and that Peter came after him. He says that Peter only saw the linen wrappings lying in the tomb, but he says that the Beloved Disciple saw and believed.

- This scene shows that this community considers the disciple whom Jesus loved to be the leading disciple. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Peter is clearly the leader. Here, it's the Beloved Disciple who reaches the tomb before Peter and who is the first one to believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

- Who was the Beloved Disciple? In the gospel, he's left completely anonymous. Later Christians identified him as the disciple John, the son of Zebedee, who appears in the other gospels. That John is never named in the last of the four gospels, so early Christians identified him as the Beloved Disciple. That's why the gospel is known as the Gospel of John. It's possible that John, son of Zebedee, was that disciple, but there's no way to know for sure. For whatever reason, the author chose not to use the Beloved Disciple's name.

The Divine Word

- The community in which the Gospel of John likely originated invested special authority in a single disciple of Jesus whom they depicted as specially loved by Jesus and as in some way taking Jesus's place after Jesus's death and resurrection. We can enter into the specific theology of this group by turning to the opening of the gospel. The words of this prologue are among the most famous in the New Testament:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

- The phrase "in the beginning," the reference to God bringing things into being, and the distinction between light and darkness—all these things evoke the opening of the book of Genesis. In the Gospel of John, however, God doesn't create everything directly. Instead, God creates through his Word, the Word who is with God and somehow also is God. Through the Word, all things come into being.

- The concept of creation through the Word is inspired by how God creates in Genesis—by speaking. In John, the Word has become not merely God's speech, but a being in his own right—a being who both is God and is with God. This being is Jesus, for we learn in John that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." God the Father does not become flesh; only the Word does. The Father and the Word are one, and yet two at the same time.

- The background to this idea lies both in the Bible and in Greek philosophy. In the Old Testament and related ancient Jewish writings, we find the idea that God created the world through or with the help of his Wisdom. In the book of Proverbs, God's Wisdom is personified as a woman, distinct from God. The Gospel of John assigns this role to Jesus: The author thinks that Jesus is the Wisdom of God who served as God's agent in the creation of the world.

- The author of John does not use the term "wisdom," but "word." In the Greek, the word is *logos*. There are probably several reasons for this. Among these, however, is the fact that by the 1st century, the word *logos* had become a technical term in Greek philosophy, precisely for how God creates the world or for how he interacts with it and is present in it. Any educated person who was aware of Greek philosophy would immediately recognize and understand this idea. But they would not have been well prepared for what John says about this Word of God: that he became flesh and lived as a certain man at a certain time and place.

- John's identification of Jesus as God's Word and Son makes clear Jesus's fully divine nature, and this plays out in at least two ways in the gospel's narrative. First, Jesus is not at home in this world. He does not belong

here, and the world does not accept him. Second, Jesus is in full control of his destiny. Even when he is arrested and executed, Jesus is the one in charge of everything that happens. Because Jesus does not really belong to this world, his death is not a defeat for him. Rather, it's a return to the heaven from which he came.

- According to the author of John, Jesus's rejection by the world, his lifting up, saves those in the world who believe in him. As the famous words of John 3:16 put it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." Only by descending to this world and then returning to heaven could the divine Word bring light to those in darkness and life to those in death.

Suggested Reading

Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel.*
Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple.*

JESUS AND THE JEWS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Throughout the Gospel of John, people that the author calls simply "the Jews" oppose Jesus at every turn. The gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric has contributed to a tragic history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in the Christian tradition. No historical investigation can mitigate the disturbing nature of John's depiction of the Jews, but it can help us to understand its origin—that is, where it came from and why it's so negative.

Johannine Christians

- While the other gospels of the New Testament depict conflict between Jesus and other Jews, they tend to identify certain groups among the Jews as Jesus's primary opponents—groups they call "scribes and Pharisees" or "chief priests and elders." The Gospel of John sometimes speaks of specific groups, like Pharisees, but most often uses just the general term, "the Jews."

- The Gospel of John originated in a distinct community of Christians that had developed its own way of thinking about Jesus. John's depiction of Jesus in sharp conflict with his fellow Jews most likely reflects the experience of these Christians as part of a Jewish community that had at some point expelled them for their claims about Jesus. The bitter feelings following this expulsion manifest themselves in the gospel's depiction of Jews as hostile to Jesus.

- John's story of a blind man whose sight is restored by Jesus probably reflects what the Johannine Christians had experienced, so it's worth examining closely. The story opens when Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who had been blind from his birth. Jesus applies some mud made with his own saliva to the man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When he does so, the man gains the ability to see.

- People bring the blind man to the Pharisees, and a dispute arises. Jesus had cured the man on the Sabbath, when work is presumably forbidden. Some Pharisees respond that Jesus cannot be sent from God if he does not observe the Sabbath properly. Others ask how a sinner would be able to perform such signs. "And they were divided," the author says. Asked what he thinks, the formerly blind man says, "He is a prophet."

- The leaders of the community, now called simply the Jews, wonder whether the man really was born blind. They summon the man's parents, who say that he was born blind, but claim not to know how he got his

sight. The author writes, "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue."

- In the story, the formerly blind man is expelled from the synagogue when he refuses to denounce Jesus. Afterward, Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The man says that he will believe whoever Jesus tells him is the Son of Man. When Jesus says that he himself is the Son of Man, the man says, "Lord, I believe," and he worships him.

- The claim that Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue does not apply to the lifetime of Jesus, when that sort of thing did not happen. It points instead to the late 1st century, the time when the Gospel of John was written. We can imagine that during this later period, there could have been a synagogue whose leaders agreed that people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah should be expelled.

- The story of the blind man is really the story of the Johannine Christians. They, too, had been faithful Jews, members of a synagogue. That synagogue became divided over what to make of Jesus of Nazareth. At some point, leaders of the synagogue demanded that people declare their allegiance and condemn Jesus as a sinner. Those who refused were expelled, forming a separate community of Jesus worshipers.

Shaping the Gospel

- The experience of the Johannine Christians shaped the Gospel of John in several ways. Most obviously, it helps explain the vehemence of the gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric, even if it does not excuse it. "The Jews" in

the Gospel of John are not all Jews, not Jews in general, and certainly not Judaism as a religion. Rather, they are the community to which these Christians had once belonged, but which had turned away from them.

- The effects of the Johannine Christians' experience show up in subtler ways as well. For example, there are other characters similar to the parents of the blind man, characters who seem to believe in Jesus but keep quiet about it so that they can maintain their position in the Jewish community. The gospel writer is not positive about such people. In his view, you belong either to the light or to the darkness. You either belong to this world or, like Jesus, you do not belong to this world. You follow Jesus, or you follow Moses.

- The gospel frequently sets Jesus in contrast with Jewish tradition, especially as embodied in Moses. In John 1:17, for example, the author writes, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In this way, John differs especially from the Gospel of Matthew, which presents Jesus as similar to Moses, as a second Moses. As Matthew presents it, you don't need to choose between Jesus and Moses. By following Jesus, you become a better follower of Moses.

- The reason for this difference between John and Matthew is most likely the differing contexts in which the authors of the two gospels wrote. Matthew was trying to persuade fellow Jews to follow Jesus and to persuade fellow Christians not to discard the Jewish Law. John was trying to explain why he and his fellow Christians could no longer be part of the Jewish synagogue. They had been given a choice by the leaders of their Jewish community—Moses or Jesus—and they chose Jesus.

- Another distinctive feature of the Gospel of John is what scholars call the gospel's realized eschatology. Eschatology is teaching about the final things or the end times, and it can be found in just about every writing

in the New Testament. The Gospel of John frequently speaks as if some of the events of the end times have already happened. That's realized eschatology: the idea that the final things have already taken place.

- John stresses the absolute importance of now, the moment of decision, when one either comes to the light of Jesus or chooses to remain in the darkness. When you make that decision, in a sense, the resurrection and the final judgment have already happened; you have passed from death to life. This teaching also reflects the specific experience of the Johannine community. They and others had faced that moment of decision, and it was truly a time of judgment.

Interpretive Disputes

- The Gospel of John eventually began to circulate in other Christian groups. As time passed, those groups were increasingly made up of Gentiles, not Jews. These people did not have the original experience of the Johannine Christians. In these later contexts, the gospel could be difficult to understand, even controversial.

- There's little evidence for Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries rejecting the Gospel of John, but there's plenty of evidence for them arguing over what it means. And you can understand why: What does it mean to say that the Jews have the devil as their father? If the Law came through Moses, but grace and truth come through Jesus Christ, does that mean Moses and the Law have no value?

- Some Christians concluded that John must mean that the God of Moses, of the Law, and of the Jewish tradition is indeed satanic, a false and hostile divine being. These were the Gnostics, who were active in the

2nd and 3rd centuries. One of their most important writings is called the *Secret Book of John*, a title which refers to the same disciple who was believed to have written the Gospel of John.

- According to the *Secret Book of John*, Christ appeared after his death to John and explained many of the questions raised by the gospel. Among the truths he reveals to John is that the Law of Moses is deeply flawed. This is because Moses failed to realize that the god who created this world and gave him the Law is indeed satanic and hostile to human beings. Jesus's Father is presented as higher than that god, as a great invisible spirit who can be known only through the revelation of Jesus.

- Other Christians interpreted the Gospel of John less radically. Among these were the Valentinians, a group inspired by the teachings of Valentinus, a Christian theologian who lived and taught in Rome in the middle of the 2nd century. The Valentinians agreed with the Gnostics that the Father of Jesus Christ was not the god of the Old Testament, but a higher, more spiritual god. But they did not think the god of the Old Testament was satanic, just a lesser divinity who eventually cooperates with Jesus and the true God in guiding the world.

- It was a Valentinian theologian who composed the earliest known Christian commentary on a New Testament book. His name was Heracleon, and in the late 2nd century, he composed a set of comments on the Gospel of John in which he elucidated its meaning through close study of individual passages and even specific words. In Heracleon's view, John reveals that the god who created the world and gave the Law through Moses is not the Father of Jesus, but a lower god.

- In the early 3rd century, a more mainstream Christian, Origen of Alexandria, wrote his own commentary on John, in part to refute the commentary of Heracleon. Christians continued to argue with one

another about how to understand the highly symbolic language of the Gospel of John and its strong condemnations of the Jews. They also used the gospel as a basis for explaining Jesus's divine identity.

Suggested Reading

Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel.*
Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple.*

THE COMMUNITY OF JOHN AFTER THE GOSPEL

What happens when an early Christian community begins to fall apart? What should the outcome be when Christians disagree with each other—about theology or something else—so strongly that members leave the group or challenge the group's leadership? This is the subject of the letters of John.

Schism and Docetism

- The New Testament contains three books that are called the letters of John. Only 2 and 3 John are definitely letters, however; 1 John might be a letter, but it looks more like a sermon or essay. Most historians do not believe that these works were written by a disciple named John, or even by the same author as the Gospel of John, but they do come from the same Johannine Christian tradition that produced the gospel.

- It seems likely that the three letters of John share a single author, a man who in 2 and 3 John identifies himself as "the elder." The elder is at least the author of 2 and 3 John, and he is definitely a member of a Johannine Christian community. A schism within this community is the subject of the book we call 1 John.

- According to the author of 1 John, some people have left the group. In 1 John 2:18, the author refers to them as "antichrists." Within the New Testament, this term appears only in 1 and 2 John, and it refers to a figure who is opposed to Christ or a false Christ. Throughout history, Christians have identified certain enemies or powerful people as possible antichrists.

- The author of 1 John believes that the apostates have failed to abide by the traditional teachings of the church. The author condemns anyone "who denies that Jesus is the Christ." The antichrist, he says, is "the one who denies the Father and the Son." Later, the author says that true Christians "confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." False Christians, he says, "do not confess Jesus."

- These references tell us that the division has something to do with beliefs about Jesus. It seems unlikely that the author's opponents simply stopped believing that Jesus is the Messiah or the Son of God. After all, that's

what all Christians believe. His opponents are still somehow entangled with his church—otherwise, he would have no reason to write this essay and try to persuade other Christians not to follow them.

- Most historians have concluded that the major issue must be whether Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, as the author puts it in chapter 4. In that case, when the author says that the opponents deny that Jesus is the Christ, this would mean that the opponents deny that the fleshly human Jesus is the Messiah. They would say that the Christ or the Son was a purely spiritual being, not a flesh-and-blood human named Jesus.

- Historians call this theological position Docetism. The term comes from the Greek word *dokein*, which means "to seem" or "to appear." Docetists believed that Christ only seemed or appeared to be a fleshly human being like other people, when in reality, he was purely spiritual.

- Other early Christian authors refer to this belief. A Christian leader named Ignatius, from Antioch in Syria, wrote a set of letters during the early 100s, around the same time the letters of John were written. He, too, complained about Christians who did not believe that Jesus had real flesh and therefore did not really suffer on the cross. Docetist Christians fully believed in the divine nature of Jesus Christ and in the salvation that he brings, but in their view, a truly divine being could not have flesh and blood and could not suffer and die.

- It's possible that some Johannine Christians may have gotten these types of ideas from the Gospel of John. While it is certainly not Docetic—"The Word became flesh and lived among us," the gospel proclaims—it strongly emphasizes Jesus's divine identity as the Word or Son of God. It repeatedly states that Jesus really does not belong to this world, and Jesus does not seem to endure any real suffering, even when he dies.

- Docetic ideas may have been attractive even for those who remained in the Johannine community, or perhaps some Johannine Christians thought that this particular theological difference didn't matter very much. That's why the book we call 1 John was written. The author of 1 John wants to encourage the remaining members of his group to stay faithful, not to join the apostates, and to continue to believe in the community's traditions as he understands them.

Denial of Hospitality

- The book we call 2 John truly is a letter. The author identifies himself as "the elder" and says that he's writing to "the elect lady and her children," most likely a metaphor for a nearby church and its members. At the end of the letter, the elder sends greetings from "the children of your elect sister," probably referring to the elder's local church and its members.

- The Johannine Christians now seem to have multiple groups, probably house churches like those associated with the mission of Paul back in the middle of the 1st century. These local assemblies have their own leaders, such as the elder. It was probably unclear how these local groups should relate to one another. They did not have a headquarters or leading church; instead, they formed a network of roughly equal groups.

- The elder wrote this letter because he was concerned that the local community to which he wrote was in danger of adopting Docetic beliefs. He warns about deceivers who "do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." He tells the community to be on guard against such teachings.

- The elder also suggests a practical way of fighting against Docetic beliefs. He writes, "Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching," meaning the true teaching of the

elder. To welcome a false believer is to share in that person's evil deeds. In other words, the elder advocates withdrawal of hospitality from Christians who hold teachings that he considers false.

- Hospitality was an important Christian practice in the early centuries. Traveling missionaries—and even Christians traveling for other reasons—depended upon local Christian communities for shelter, food, and additional support. And because Christians lacked their own buildings, even Christians who were not traveling needed individual members of the community to welcome them into their homes for worship.

- Denial of hospitality, as suggested by the elder, would pressure individual traveling Christians to change their views. Moreover, it would have represented something like a termination of diplomatic relations between the local churches involved. A church's refusal to grant hospitality to travelers from another community indicated that the church no longer considered the other community a legitimate Christian group.

Challenges to Leadership

- We have no way of knowing whether the congregation to which the elder wrote in 2 John followed his instructions, but the letter we call 3 John reveals something of an ironic turn. In 3 John, the elder complains that another Christian group is not welcoming travelers from his community. The tactic that the elder had advocated in 2 John was now being used against him!

- The circumstances under which the elder wrote 3 John are not entirely clear. The letter is addressed to a Christian named Gaius, who seems to be a leader of some kind. The elder praises Gaius and his community for

showing hospitality to people from the elder's community. This shows that Gaius and his people walk in the way of truth and that they love other Christians.

- The elder complains about a fellow Christian named Diotrephes. According to the elder, Diotrephes "likes to put himself first and does not acknowledge our authority." Moreover, the elder claims that Diotrephes has made false charges against him and has refused to give hospitality to Christians associated with the elder. If Christians in Diotrephes's congregation want to give hospitality to the elder's people, Diotrephes expels them from his church. The elder says that he will say more about all this if he's able to visit Gaius in person.

- In this letter, the elder does not mention any theological reason for his argument with Diotrephes. It's possible that there was no theological issue at all. Possibly Diotrephes just refused to recognize that the elder had any authority over him and his group, and because the elder insisted that he does, Diotrephes demonstrated his independence by refusing to give hospitality to the elder's emissaries.

- The elder's letter to Gaius suggests that the elder was worried that other Christians might take Diotrephes's side in the conflict. He wanted Gaius in his camp, and he may have sent the letter for that reason. We have no information about what happened next. Did Gaius take the side of the elder? Did he agree with Diotrephes? Maybe he just tried to stay out of the whole conflict.

- What we can say is that 3 John shows the challenges that arose as Christian groups multiplied and diversified. Local congregations gained their own leaders, and they could come into conflict with other communities, sometimes about theology and sometimes about who was in charge of whom. Granting and withholding hospitality could be tools in these struggles among Christian churches and their leaders.

- Some Christians continued to hold Docetic beliefs throughout the 2nd century, and other Christians continued to find such ideas unacceptable. Like the elder, they opposed Docetic beliefs by arguing that the gospels of the New Testament, including the Gospel of John, provide no support for such an understanding. And also like the elder, they developed practical methods to control the spread of such doctrines.

- Christians created the office of bishop to enforce correct belief. Bishops had the power to excommunicate Christians who had heretical ideas, disallowing them from receiving the Eucharist. And they would cut off relations with other bishops and churches with whom they disagreed. But in the first three centuries of Christianity, these methods were not entirely successful. Rejected Christians didn't go away; instead, they developed their own networks of supportive communities.

- It was not until the 4th century, when the Roman emperors became Christians, that Christian leaders were able to enforce orthodoxy and suppress heresy. The Roman government could send heretical bishops into exile, take away church property from heretical groups, and give financial and legal support only to orthodox bishops and their churches.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple.*
Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles.*
Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity.*

IN SEARCH OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

When you read the four gospels closely, study their distinct themes, and compare their accounts, you may begin to wonder what Jesus was really like, what he actually said and did. The investigation of what we can say historically about the man Jesus of Nazareth, in contrast to the theological portraits of Christ that we find in the gospels, is a problem historians refer to as the historical Jesus.

Changing Perspectives

- The historical Jesus is a modern idea, one that developed after biblical scholars began to study the gospels critically in the 18th century. Modern critical study of the gospels is based on a fundamental principle: The gospels are primarily evidence for the beliefs and practices of their authors and their communities when they wrote them in the late 1st century. Only secondarily, and with great care, can the gospels serve as evidence for the life and teachings of Jesus himself.

- On the other hand, the gospels really are the only good evidence for Jesus. Paul wrote his letters earlier than the gospels were composed, but all he tells us is that Jesus was born of a woman and was crucified and resurrected from the dead. He refers to at least one teaching of Jesus, on divorce. There are non-Christian authors who mention Jesus—or, rather, who refer to the existence of people who believe in Jesus—but they, too, do not tell us anything we can't find in the gospels.

- Therefore, when historians reconstruct the historical Jesus, they must rely almost exclusively on the New Testament gospels, even as they rigorously question the evidence that the gospels provide. This is precisely how historians approach all ancient sources, whether they are about Alexander the Great, Socrates, or Jesus.

- Christians have not always thought about the gospels in this way. Most Christians during the ancient and medieval eras didn't notice the differences among the gospels. Before printed books and widespread literacy, most Christians encountered the gospels as short passages read aloud in church during worship services. They would not have had the opportunity to think of the gospels as distinct texts with their own theologies.

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- Learned Christian scholars of ancient and medieval times did read the gospels as complete texts and compare them, and they did notice that the gospels differed in how they presented Jesus. Some denied that there were differences, instead finding ways to harmonize the gospels. This remains a popular view among Christians who believe the biblical writers were infallible and that God would not allow historical inaccuracies to occur.

- Beginning in the 16th century, the printing press and rising literacy rates in western Europe enabled increasing numbers of thoughtful people to read the gospels in their entirety for themselves. Protestant reformers encouraged close study of the Scriptures even by ordinary Christians. People started to notice that the gospels do not always agree.

- While some Protestants emphasized the inerrancy of the biblical text, Martin Luther argued that what was important was the message about Christ the Bible seeks to communicate. Luther never doubted, for

example, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem just as Matthew and Luke say, but at the same time, he said that believing such facts is not as important as believing that Christ had been born for one's salvation.

- The birth and growth of the scientific method in the 17th and 18th centuries led European scholars to question received traditions and base their work on reason, not faith. They began to study a variety of ancient cultures and to see the New Testament and early Christianity as similar to other ancient religions and their literature.

- During the 19th century, history as a professional discipline came into being. Historians began to work as they do today: by reading and evaluating primary sources in their original languages, making claims based on reasoned arguments from the evidence, and testing hypotheses through debate in seminars, lectures, and publications. It's during this period that historians began seriously to investigate the evidence for Jesus through the methods of critical history.

Evaluating Authenticity

- As historians first began to work on the problem of Jesus, they tended to concentrate on Jesus's teachings. Historians were not sure what to do with the stories of what Jesus did, because they are full of miracles that violated their understanding of how the natural world works and that are beyond verification through normal historical methods. These seemed clearly to be the products of the religious imagination.

- Moreover, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Christian theologians began to believe that the true heart of the Christian faith was its moral teaching, not its claims about Jesus's divinity or the resurrection of the dead. Historians therefore wanted to investigate what Jesus himself

taught. During the 20th century, they developed a set of criteria for assessing whether a saying attributed to Jesus in the gospels might have been spoken by Jesus himself during his ministry.

- The first criterion used by historians is the criterion of multiple attestation: If a saying appears in more than one independent source, then it's more likely to be authentic. Of course, if a saying appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it does not have multiple attestation, because Matthew and Luke could have copied it from Mark; they are not independent witnesses to the saying. Likewise, if the exact same saying appears in Matthew and Luke, it does not have multiple attestation, because it probably came from the single source Q.

- There aren't a huge number of sayings with multiple attestation. A good example of one is Jesus's prohibition of divorce and remarriage. Mark, Paul in 1 Corinthians, and (as far as we can tell) Q all have some version of Jesus saying that a person who divorces and remarries is committing adultery. These versions differ in their exact forms, but scholars agree that Jesus himself must have said this in some way.

- A second criterion is called the criterion of dissimilarity: A saying is more likely to be authentic if it's dissimilar from or even contradicts general Jewish teaching at the time of Jesus and the preaching of the early church. If a saying simply repeats what early Jews believed or what early Christians taught, then it's easy to imagine that it was just attributed to Jesus and does not go back to him.

- On this basis, historians rule out as authentic sayings in which Jesus predicts his crucifixion and resurrection or, as in the Gospel of John, proclaims his divinity openly. These sayings represent what early Christians came to believe about Jesus after his death and resurrection, so they cannot be attributed to Jesus before these events. It's certainly possible that Jesus predicted that he would be killed, but this criterion means that we cannot claim that he did very securely.

- On the other hand, when a saying contradicts early Christian teaching, there's a good chance that Jesus really said it. The saying about divorce passes this criterion as well, for as early as Paul, we can see that Christians did allow for divorce in certain situations, despite what Jesus is reported to have said. Christians probably did not make up a saying of Jesus that they then had to figure out how to get around.

- A third criterion is called contextual credibility: A saying must make sense as something a Jewish man in Palestine could have said in the early 1st century. Divorce is a good example here as well. Mark, Paul, and Q all report Jesus prohibiting divorce. Only in Mark, however, does Jesus speak of a wife divorcing her husband. In ancient Judaism, a wife could not divorce her husband; only the husband could initiate a divorce. Scholars therefore conclude that this addition about divorce in Mark does not go back to Jesus.

- The rigorous nature of the criteria is both their strength and their weakness. On the one hand, if you apply the criteria diligently, you end up with arguments for authentic sayings that are really strong. On the other hand, you don't end up with many authentic sayings. In the last 30 years or so, many scholars have criticized this approach to the historical Jesus.

- Historians in recent years have taken a more holistic approach to reconstructing the historical Jesus. They consider what he said and did simultaneously, and they often use the more general facts that we can know about Jesus as the context for understanding and assessing what he may have taught. The criteria have not gone away, however, because their insights reflect sound historical thinking.

Reaching Consensus

- Historians nearly unanimously agree on a sketch of Jesus's career. He came from Nazareth and was baptized by John the Baptist. He must have accepted John the Baptist's message and may even have been part of his ministry for a while. At some point, however, Jesus struck out on his own.

- John the Baptist was known to be ascetic in his lifestyle, following a restricted diet and wearing harsh clothing, and he preached beside the Jordan River. In contrast, Jesus was itinerant, traveling around the towns and villages of Galilee, and he was not ascetic in his behavior. Like other charismatic preachers, Jesus performed healings and exorcisms.

- Although Jesus moved around, he attracted a group of followers who were loyal to him, accompanied him on his journeys, and provided him with food and shelter. These included both men and women. Among these followers was an inner group of 12 disciples, selected by Jesus himself. Jesus confined his mission to his fellow Jews. He did not seek out Gentiles—that is, non-Jews.

- Eventually, Jesus came into conflict with some Jewish leaders. That conflict may have included a controversy over the Temple in Jerusalem. The Roman authorities became suspicious of Jesus's motives and aims. The Romans arrested him and crucified him as a rebel, as someone who claimed to be or who was believed to be a King of the Jews.

- Each of these claims about Jesus can be supported through evidence-based arguments that invoke reasoning similar to the criteria of authenticity. Multiple independent sources present these ideas, some of them are at odds with later Christian practice, and all of them make perfect sense within the context of 1st-century Palestinian Judaism.

- The majority of scholars agree that these facts indicate that Jesus preached a version of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. That is, he told people, as John the Baptist did, that the kingdom of God was approaching, that God would overthrow the present world order, that there would be a resurrection and judgment, and that Israel would be restored to purity and holiness and to possession of the land that God had promised it.

- A minority of scholars deny that Jesus preached a future judgment and kingdom. Instead, they claim that Jesus's concept of the kingdom of God was a potentially present reality of justice, peace, and equality. These dissenters argue that Jesus's break with John indicates that Jesus came to reject John's message, and that his ministry with known sinners is a sign of God's present love for even the marginal and the outcast.

- Even historians who share a broad consensus about Jesus differ on multiple details and engage in spirited debate about them. Why did Jesus come into conflict with certain Jewish leaders? Did they disagree about how soon the kingdom would come? Were they offended by Jesus's lifestyle and associations with sinners? Did Jesus challenge certain practices of the Jewish Law? Did Jesus make one trip to Jerusalem or several?

Suggested Reading

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth.*
Crossan, *Jesus.*
Ehrman, *Jesus.*

INTERPRETING ABRAHAM IN HEBREWS AND JAMES

Abraham, the ancient patriarch of Israel and the father of the Jewish people, appears frequently in the writings of the New Testament. Sometimes he's a role model whom Christians should try to imitate, but more often he's an object of controversy. We find these two Abrahams—the role model and the object of controversy—in two of the more enigmatic books of the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter of James.

Prior Appearances

- Abraham had emerged as a role model and topic of controversy in early Christian literature well before Hebrews and James were written, which probably took place in the final decades of the 1st century. Abraham serves a number of functions in these earlier works. To begin with, he serves to legitimate Jesus's identity as the Jewish Messiah. Both Matthew and Luke trace Jesus's lineage back to Abraham, which ties Jesus to the ancestor of all Jews and bolsters his claim to be the Messiah, the fulfillment of Jewish tradition.

- Abraham reappears in Luke, chapter 16, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Abraham explains that in the afterlife, the poor, like Lazarus, receive the comfort they lacked during their earthly lives. But he chastises the rich man and, by implication, his fellow Jews. Here, Abraham serves to chastise the people who claim descent from him. Just being a descendant of Abraham is evidently not enough; you also have to listen to the message of the prophets, especially Jesus, and live righteously.

- Abraham plays a similar role in John, chapter 8. There, a group of Jews resist the idea that the truth that Jesus brings will set them free because, they say, as descendants of Abraham, they have never been slaves. "Very truly, I tell you," Jesus says, "before Abraham was I am." Here, Abraham functions to legitimate Jesus as the savior, but not by being Jesus's ancestor, as in Matthew and Luke. Instead, Jesus is presented as earlier than and superior to Abraham, and thus Jews will find their freedom in Jesus, not in Abraham.

- Paul discusses Abraham at length in Galatians and Romans. Paul argued that Gentiles who believe in Jesus did not need to become Jews by getting circumcised and practicing the Jewish Law. He had to show that Abraham, the first man whom God commanded to be circumcised,

actually was made righteous not through circumcision but by having faith in God. Here, Abraham is a model for having faith in God. Paul's approach to Abraham was controversial, and it remained so.

Model of Faith

- The writing known as the Letter to the Hebrews is not a letter, nor was it written to the Hebrews. It's actually a sermon, or what the author calls a "word of exhortation." The audience consists not of Hebrews, but of Christians. The author is unknown. Many Christians have attributed Hebrews to Paul, but its style is very different from that of the genuine Pauline letters, and the text appears to have been written after the period of the original apostles.

- The author appears to be addressing a congregation that has lost enthusiasm for the faith and in which some members may be drifting away. The group may have lost enthusiasm because of some earlier persecution, which the author describes in chapter 10 as a "hard struggle with sufferings." Some members had been imprisoned, and others had lost possessions. These Christians may have begun to wonder why they have to go through so much difficulty—and for how much longer they would have to do so.

- The author encourages the believers to persevere and endure. These Christians need faith, which the author defines in Hebrews 11:1 as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In order to direct believers to what they cannot see, the author uses the Temple in Jerusalem, the sacrifices there, and the Jewish tradition in general as earthly things that point to the more real heavenly things.

- This view became a standard Christian approach to the Old Testament, fostering a method of interpretation called typology. Typology refers to considering events, people, and things in the Old Testament as indicators or signifiers of Christian events, people, and things. Under this approach, when the Old Testament describes, for example, a high priest offering a sacrifice in the Temple, that's really about Jesus offering the eternal sacrifice of himself in the eternal sanctuary of heaven.

- When taken to an extreme, this view can lead to what's called supersessionism. This is the theological view that the new covenant of Christianity actually replaces the old covenant with the Jews. The Hebrew Bible has no independent and continuing validity, and Jews have been replaced by Christians as the people of God. That's not where the author of Hebrews goes, but his thinking leads in that direction.

- In Hebrews, chapter 11, the author offers a number of Old Testament figures as examples of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, and many more. This is where Abraham comes in. The author recalls that Abraham left his native land to set out for a place that he did not know. Even when Abraham lived in the land that God had promised him, he lived in tents, as if he were in a foreign county. That's because, the author says, Abraham "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

- Likewise, Abraham's faith enabled him to look beyond his and Sarah's barrenness and to receive the power to procreate and look forward to numerous descendants. His faith empowered him to sacrifice his son Isaac, because he looked forward to God's ability to raise someone from the dead. This is a good example of typology: The author says that Abraham received Isaac back as a symbol of Jesus's resurrection.

- Abraham and the other biblical heroes, the author explains, died without receiving what they had been promised, but they lived their lives in faith: They saw the things that they were promised from a distance and

greeted them. They lived as strangers and foreigners on this earth, looking forward to their true homeland, to the better country—that is, the heavenly one.

- Here, Abraham serves as a model for a particular understanding of faith. Faith is placing one's confidence in things unseen, things that lie in the future and in heaven. People who have such faith, as Abraham did, persevere in moving through this life, even when there is hardship and disappointment, because they know that something better has been promised them. That's the message of Hebrews for Christians who may have lost their initial enthusiasm for the Christian gospel.

Faith and Works

- The Letter of James opens with the author, who calls himself "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," writing to "the twelve tribes in the dispersion." By calling them "the twelve tribes in the dispersion," the author identifies the Christians to whom he writes as the new or true Israel, and yet they live not in the promised land of Israel, but as strangers in foreign lands.

- Most historians agree that the author is claiming to be James, the brother of Jesus, and most historians agree that he is not, in fact, that James. There are many signs that the letter was written decades after that James died. Even more important, the letter is written in good, even elegant Greek, and it draws on rhetorical strategies and traditional arguments from Jewish and pagan literature in Greek. James the brother of Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, not Greek, and he almost certainly couldn't write. Nevertheless, we will refer to the author of the letter as James for convenience's sake.

- We get a few glimpses of what church life was like when James wrote this letter. There appears to have been a somewhat advanced church community, with fairly organized leadership roles, developed rituals like anointing of the sick, and a wide range of members, with a tendency to give precedence to the wealthy ones—who, we can guess, probably paid a lot of the bills. To this group, James offers what he calls "wisdom," full of moral exhortation and timeless advice about the moral life.

- For James, wisdom is not about thinking things or knowing things; it's about doing things and acting in the right way. In James 1:22, he exhorts, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." Religion, he says, is worthless if it does not lead to righteous living. Christians, therefore, must not just say that they believe in God; they need also to do what God has told them to do.

- In James, chapter 2, the author brings forth Abraham as an example of how one must have both faith and works to be saved:

> Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.

It's hard to miss the allusions to Romans and Galatians in this passage, especially in the Greek.

- The author of James is trying to refute Paul's teachings regarding faith and works. He argues that Abraham was justified by both faith and works—not by faith alone, as Paul had argued in Romans and Galatians.

This may be why the author chose to write in the person of James, the brother of Jesus. Paul had mentioned James as one of the apostles who initially opposed his teaching of justification by faith alone.

- Although James is clearly opposing Paul's teaching on faith and works, many historians argue that James did not understand what Paul was really saying. Paul was not arguing that Christians need only to believe and can neglect doing good things like feeding the hungry; instead, he was arguing that Christians don't need to get circumcised or observe Jewish food laws. James may have thought he was disagreeing with Paul, but the two weren't really talking about the same thing.

- Many later Christians did see the Letter of James as contradicting Paul, which may be one reason why it took a while for the work to become part of the New Testament. Martin Luther famously considered James to be opposed to Paul, saying that the Letter of James "contradicts Paul and all Scripture." Luther called the letter "an epistle of straw" and said, "I refuse James a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible."

Suggested Reading

Batten, *What Are They Saying about the Letter of James?*
Harrington, *What Are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?*
Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews.*

CHURCHES IN CRISIS IN 1–2 PETER AND JUDE

The letters known as 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude were among the last works of the New Testament to be written. As a result, all three reflect the tensions that characterized the mature and growing religious movement that Christianity had become. These tensions included the increased pressure from outsiders that came with higher visibility and disputes over how to interpret earlier Christian literature.

Alienation and Authority

- The author of 1 Peter identifies himself as "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ," writing "to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." Most historians don't think that the author was actually the Apostle Peter. The letter is composed in high-quality Greek, while Peter was allegedly a fisherman from Galilee. Peter probably spoke only Aramaic, and he almost certainly could not write.

- The letter assumes that Christians are found "in all the world," as the author writes in chapter 5, but this was hardly the situation when Peter was alive. On top of that, the author really doesn't draw on what should have been extensive personal experience of Jesus; all we get is a vague reference to the author being "a witness of the sufferings of Christ."

- The recipients of 1 Peter are alienated, living in a world that is not their home. That's the main problem that the letter addresses: Christians are experiencing rejection by the surrounding society. In chapter 1, the author refers to them as having "had to suffer various trials." In chapter 4, he says they are undergoing "a fiery ordeal" that is testing them. In chapter 5, he says that all Christians experience "the same kinds of suffering."

- It does not seem, however, that the Roman government is officially persecuting these believers. Rather, non-Christians are treating them badly. As they refused to participate in the social and religious activities their friends and neighbors considered normal, people started criticizing them, saying false things against them, and mistreating them. This kind of abuse doubtless became a greater problem as Christians became more numerous and widespread and thus more visible to non-Christians.

- The author encourages the Christians to accept their sufferings as Christ had accepted his. In so doing, they can anticipate sharing in Christ's glory in the future. Suffering, then, becomes a way to be closer to Christ,

and it's a sign that one is following the righteous path to which he calls people. In responding to those who persecute them, Christians should likewise follow the example of Jesus, who did not seek retaliation. Even Christian slaves, if they are beaten unjustly, should not rebel.

- To be sure, it's appropriate for Christians to defend themselves against false accusations. In chapter 3, the author tells his audience that they should not be intimidated by other people and that they should defend themselves to anyone who demands an accounting from them. But they should do so "in gentleness and reverence," not, then, in a spirit of anger or retaliation. Such is the example that Christ set.

- Although the Christians should follow Christ by accepting suffering without retaliation, the author tells them that they can perhaps avoid the hostility of outsiders by behaving in ways they would consider morally conventional. He exhorts the believers to live according to a traditional household code—that is, according to the standard ancient understanding of how members of a household should behave. In this way, Christians will silence their pagan critics.

- The author says that Christians should obey the government and honor the emperor. Christian slaves should accept the authority of their masters, even if they are harsh and cruel. Likewise, Christian wives should accept the authority of their husbands; this is true even if their husbands are pagans, because their obedience may win their husbands to Christian faith. The author warns them against adorning themselves externally through braiding the hair or wearing fine clothes and jewelry.

Slander and Signs

- The Letter of Jude claims to have been written by "Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James." The author is claiming to be the Jude who appears in Matthew and Mark as one of the brothers of Jesus. Most historians do not accept this claim, for a familiar reason: Jude is written in perfectly good Greek, while the brother of Jesus would have spoken Aramaic and almost certainly would not have been able to read or write.

- Most ancient Christians accepted the letter's attribution to Jude, and in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christian authors cited the letter without much ambivalence. In the 4th century, however, people raised questions about Jude and whether it should be in the New Testament, because the author quotes from an ancient Jewish book called 1 Enoch. He treats that book as authoritative, like any book of the Old Testament.

- By the 4th century, Christians had begun to define their Old Testament canon, and they had excluded 1 Enoch from it. Jude's quotation of 1 Enoch thus became a problem for some Christians. Should a book in the New Testament quote as scripture a book not in the Old Testament? In the end, Jude made it into the canon despite its quotation of 1 Enoch.

- The subject of Jude is false Christian teachers. Certain Christians are teaching something that the author considers highly dangerous. Much of the letter consists of invective against these opponents. The author certainly sees great danger in what the opponents teach. But what did they teach? The author never really says, and historians therefore can't say much either.

- The only clue is the author's claim that the false teachers "slander the glorious ones," a term that most likely refers to angels. We do know that early Christians differed over how highly they should esteem angels. It's

entirely plausible that Jude's false teachers had a less positive view of angels than he thought they should. Unfortunately, that's about as much as we can see about what the opponents taught.

- Much more interesting is how the author of Jude tries to dissuade his readers from listening to the false teachers. One way is by disparaging them as licentious, gluttonous, bombastic flatterers. He also tells his readers that the appearance of such false teachers is to be expected and is a sign of the end times, claiming that this state of affairs was predicted by the apostles.

- These claims have at least two effects: First, they reassure Christians that false teachers are to be expected as part of what must happen before the end can come. Second, they encourage Christians to prepare for the final judgment rather than falling under the spell of false teachers. The false teachers will soon be judged and punished, and the readers should make sure they are not punished with them.

- With so little theological content, the Letter of Jude has primarily been used for its harsh rhetoric, which Christians have frequently borrowed to disparage other Christians they consider heretics. The first person known to have done so is the author of 2 Peter.

Testament and Tradition

- Very few historians think 2 Peter was written by the Apostle Peter. Even most ancient Christian scholars did not think so, because the style differs so greatly from 1 Peter, which they thought Peter did write. But the letter was so widely used and cited that they put it in the New Testament anyway.

- By the time 2 Peter was written, Christians were openly questioning whether Jesus would ever come back. Certain verses suggest that at least some of the letters of Paul, which were originally addressed to multiple congregations in disparate locations, had been assembled into a collection. All this indicates that 2 Peter originated in the early 2nd century, perhaps as late as the 120s.

- Like Jude, 2 Peter concerns so-called false teachers. In 2 Peter, however, we learn a little more about what they taught: They questioned whether the current world order was going to come to an end, as nearly all other early Christian writings we have studied taught, and they defended their views by citing the letters of Paul.

- The author of 2 Peter counters these opponents by recycling the invective found in Jude. Of the 25 verses of Jude, 19 appear in 2 Peter. The author also creates a document that purports to be the dying words of Peter. It's what biblical scholars call a testament, a speech given by a heroic person on his deathbed that foretells things that will happen after he dies and exhorts followers to remain faithful to the traditions he represents.

- In the testament in 2 Peter, Peter says that Jesus has revealed to him that Peter's death is near. Peter wants to remind his followers of what he has taught them so that when he is gone, they will remember his teachings. Peter then warns Christians not to pay attention to any "cleverly devised myths." Instead, they should hold fast to what he and other eyewitnesses have taught them.

- In 2 Peter, chapter 3, the author turns to a substantive argument against the false teachers' claim that the end of the world isn't really going to happen because so much time has passed since the first Christians died. The author presents this as the dying Peter predicting that people will come and say such things. God's word sustains the world, the author believes, and at some point, God's word will destroy the world with fire.

- The author's answer to why the end of the world is taking so long is one of the most famous statements in the Bible. Borrowing from Psalm 90, the author writes, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." Moreover, the author says, God is patient; he wants as many people as possible to repent. That's why God has delayed the end of the world. Nevertheless, one must always be ready.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Forged.*
Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless.*
Senior and Harrington, *1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter.*

NEW LEADERS IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

The First Letter to Timothy, Second Letter to Timothy, and Letter to Titus form a special group of New Testament writings that historians call the Pastoral Epistles. All three claim to have been written by Paul, and they share the same vocabulary, style, and ideas. They are written not to entire congregations, but to individual leaders, and they concern how these leaders ought to conduct themselves and guide their congregations.

Formal Leadership

- Practically no critical scholars of the New Testament think that the Apostle Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles. Instead, the letters are dated to the early 2nd century. The Pastoral Epistles make sense if we see them as an important stage in the development of Christianity from a charismatic sect within Judaism in the 1st century to an independent organized religion in the 3rd century.

- The genuine letters of Paul are the earliest surviving texts from any Christian. These letters show that Paul's congregations operated with a very loose organizational structure. At worship meetings, various people received gifts of the Holy Spirit—such as prayer, prophecy, or tongues—and there was no formal mechanism by which people were chosen or installed. Women could receive spiritual gifts just as men could.

- If we fast-forward almost two centuries, we find an important document called the *Apostolic Tradition*. It's traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, a bishop of Rome in the early 200s. Experts do not believe that Hippolytus wrote it, but the dating to the early 200s seems likely. The *Apostolic Tradition* shows the organizational structure that most, if not all, Christian churches had developed by the 3rd century.

- The *Apostolic Tradition* reveals an organized clergy that received compensation. Its threefold ministry structure—a single bishop, multiple priests, and deacons who report to the bishop—became the classic organization of Christian churches and can still be found today in different forms in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and other Christian denominations. All of these offices were limited to men.

- The Pastoral Epistles belong to a period when Christians were making the transition from the charismatic leadership style of Paul's time to the more formal organization of the *Apostolic Tradition*. We have similar writings

from this period that did not make it into the New Testament, but that also encourage their readers to move toward a more formal leadership structure.

- The danger of theological diversity helped motivate the transition to a more organized clergy. There is a warning early on in 1 Timothy against people who teach "any different doctrine." In 2 Timothy, two false teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, are condemned by name. There is a similar warning in Titus against "rebellious people" who teach "what is not right to teach."

- The author of the Pastoral Epistles is worried about dangers to the correct faith of Christians, and he wants a better organized church structure to guard against these dangers. The better organization for which the author advocates features a single bishop, multiple deacons, and a vaguer group called elders or presbyters. These roles are limited to men, specifically virtuous married men.

- The Pastoral Epistles advocate that each church have a council of elders, consisting of a single bishop and multiple deacons. These leaders should be good fathers who have shown that they can be faithful to one wife and can manage their children well. These men receive their spiritual gift through a ritual of ordination, and they are paid for their work. Removing an elder from office requires multiple witnesses.

Wives and Widows

- The author of the Pastoral Epistles explicitly rules out female leadership, and even vocal prayer by women. Only men should pray in Christian meetings, he says; women must be silent and learn from men. In the

Garden of Eden, Eve demonstrated a female propensity to being led astray, which rules out being a teacher. Instead, women should bear children and bring them up rightly.

- In his genuine letters, Paul mentions several women by name who surely were not silent: Prisca, Junia, Phoebe, and so on. Moreover, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, Paul explains that women should wear something on their heads when they pray and prophesy in church. On the other hand, Paul also declared that men take priority over women and pointed out the subordinate position of Eve in the Garden of Eden.

- What can Christian women do besides get married and bear children, according to the Pastoral Epistles? The author devotes extensive attention to women he calls "widows." Nearly all of these women would have had husbands who had died, but the category might have included older women who had never married and were unlikely to do so. The main thing is that the woman in question would have had no man to support her.

- The church has a list of widows, and the author says that a woman should be added to the list only if she is 60 years old or older, has been married only once, and has a reputation for doing good and serving the Christian community. The church must be financially supporting these widows, for the author says that women who have children or grandchildren to support them should not be enrolled as widows. Likewise, younger widows should get remarried and not prematurely join the ranks of the widows.

- The author's discussion of widows provides an example of how he thinks of the church in terms of the ancient household, as an extended family of wife, children, widows, and slaves, which the father led and cared for. Bishops and deacons should be good fathers; widows must have been good wives; and the church is like a household, in which virtuous members are like special utensils.

- To go along with this, the author in 1 Timothy criticizes Christians who he says forbid marriage and teach that Christians should abstain from certain foods. In 2 Timothy, he complains about people who, in his words, "make their way into households and captivate silly women." The author advocates the traditional family life of marriage and children, and he opposes asceticism—giving up sex or food for spiritual discipline.

- Although Paul himself did not advocate giving up food, he did not express enthusiasm for marriage and children. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 7, Paul said that he wished that all Christians could be as he was—that is, unmarried—and he recommended that people who were not married stay that way. Paul recognized that the celibate life was not for everyone, however. "Better to marry," Paul wrote, "than to be aflame with passion."

- The Christians whom the author of the Pastoral Epistles condemns may have criticized marriage based on their own reading of Paul's letters. There is evidence that some followers of Paul in the 2nd century advocated celibacy as better than marriage. The best example is the *Acts of Paul*, a kind of novel that recounts the adventures of Paul that are not found in the New Testament. In the *Acts of Paul*, the apostle frequently disrupts family life by converting women to Christianity despite the opposition of their husbands and families.

- The author of the Pastoral Epistles advocated a hierarchically organized church with a male clergy, and he wanted to align Christian teachings with traditional Roman values of the family and household. But other Christians continued to have a more charismatic model of leadership, one in which gifted women could preach and teach, and their version of Christianity conflicted with traditional family life in Rome.

Theological Precision

- The Pastoral Epistles contain passages that are like short creeds—little slogans that summarize what Christians should believe, especially about Jesus and his divine status. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:5, the author seems to quote a brief statement about God and Christ: "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all."

- In 1 Timothy, chapter 3, the author states what he calls "the mystery of our religion": that Christ "was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory." This is an elegant composition. Its parallelism suggests that it might have been memorized or sung by Christians.

- A final example appears in 2 Timothy, chapter 2, where the author quotes what he calls a "sure saying":

> If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

- When modern people read the Pastoral Epistles, it's understandable that we focus mainly on what we might call their political side. But we should not neglect these gems of theological precision. They express the mystery of Christian faith that the author was so eager to protect.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Forged*.
Pervo, *The Making of Paul*.
Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*.

REVELATION: ENVISIONING GOD'S REALITY

The Revelation to John was not the last New Testament book to be written. It probably comes from the 90s of the 1st century. But Revelation's position as the final book in the New Testament aptly reflects its content: a revelation from Christ to a Christian named John about what will happen at the end of the world as we know it. It presents a complex, symbolic, and at times even bizarre vision of the present time and the future.

Facing Persecution

- The author of Revelation calls himself John, and we have no reason to doubt that this was his real name. But the author does not claim to be the Apostle John. Instead, he mentions the 12 apostles as authoritative figures from the past. The style and vocabulary of Revelation do not match what we find in the Gospel of John or letters of John, so this John did not write those texts. This John identifies himself simply as a "slave" of Jesus Christ and a "brother" to his fellow Christians.

- John says that he experienced his revelation when he "was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Patmos is an island in the Aegean Sea some 40 miles off the west coast of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. In John's day, it was part of the Roman Empire. John says that he is there because of his preaching of Jesus and that he has experienced persecutions. Possibly John fled to Patmos to escape persecution, or he was banished there.

- In the area of religion, the Romans were both deeply conservative and open to pluralism. On the one hand, the Roman Empire was a multinational state, and the Romans understood that the various peoples that they ruled had their own gods and religious practices. The Romans tolerated foreign religions, and they even imported some foreign gods into the city of Rome itself. People could worship any gods they liked, but they could not offend the gods of Rome. When called upon, people needed to worship the Roman gods as well.

- Most Roman subjects would only rarely encounter the requirement to worship the Roman gods. At certain occasions—for example, joining the army or swearing an oath—they might need to offer a sacrifice of incense to a Roman deity. Or they might burn incense before a statue of the emperor, in which case they were not worshiping the emperor himself, but rather his "genius"—that is, his guiding spirit, the divine being who inspires and guides the emperor.

- Most people agreed that it was no problem to worship multiple gods. The Jews were an exception, of course; the God of Israel commanded that his people worship no gods other than him. The Romans knew that the Jews were an ancient people whose god imposed on them this peculiar commandment, and therefore they exempted Jews from worship of the Roman gods. Instead, the Jews offered sacrifices to the God of Israel on the emperor's behalf in the Temple in Jerusalem, at least until the Temple was destroyed in the year 70.

- As long as Jesus believers were seen as a subset of Judaism, they enjoyed the protection of this Jewish exemption. Eventually, it became clear that Christians were not Jews. During the time when Christian doctrine was taking shape, it wasn't easy for anyone to state definitely just who Christians were and what their new religion was all about. Christians could become the objects of suspicion and rumor: What did they do in those meetings of theirs? Did they really eat someone's flesh and drink his blood?

- Until the year 250, Roman persecutions of Christians were sporadic and local. If someone was accused of being a Christian, he or she might be arrested and asked to offer a sacrifice of incense before an image of the emperor or the personified goddess of Rome. If the accused person did so, he or she was free to go. Otherwise, they could be executed, becoming what Christians called a martyr, a witness to Jesus. It seems that John and some Christians in the churches to which he wrote faced such persecution in the 90s in western Asia Minor.

Symbols and Images

- Revelation is a type of work known as an apocalypse. As such, it most closely resembles the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. As in Daniel and other apocalypses, the visions that John receives are highly symbolic.

In Revelation, there are angels and beasts, a lamb accompanied by 144,000 men, a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, a whore, a city descending from heaven, and other surreal images. Because many of these images are not explained, later interpreters have been able to apply them to new and diverse circumstances.

- Numbers play an important role in Revelation. Plagues, trumpets, seals, and the like come in specific numbers—often seven, a number that implies completion or wholeness. The precise numbering of items and the use of meaningful numbers like seven suggest that while the events that Revelation narrates may seem chaotic and strange, there is an order behind everything that happens. God has planned everything in a precise and orderly way.

- Revelation is also marked by its frequent use of dualism. One example comes toward the end of the book, when we meet a whore who personifies Babylon and a bride who personifies the new Jerusalem. There are also images of paradox: A lamb is slain and yet lives. People dip their robes in blood but come out white. In other words, common sense often does not operate in these visions. The world is not what it seems. What you think is reality is not reality. There is another reality, God's reality.

- In Revelation, Christ tells John to write letters to seven churches. The churches are symbolized by seven golden lampstands, among which Christ stands. The churches that Jesus names are all in western Asia Minor, and the letters address specific issues in those churches. But the number seven suggests wholeness, and thus the messages of these letters are intended for all Christians. Consistent themes emerge: Christians should completely reject the pagan world. Those who advocate a more relaxed attitude are false prophets.

Portrayal of Rome

- In Revelation, there are two kinds of people: true Christians and everyone else. These people worship one of two beings: God or the demonic beast. In chapter 13, Rome and its emperor are represented by a beast, as are the priests and government officials that require people to worship the Roman emperor. At the very end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13, a dragon representing Satan introduces the beast that is Rome and its emperor. The depiction of this beast draws on Daniel, chapter 7, and the four beasts that appear there.

- All the inhabitants of the earth worship the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" Rome's power is seemingly overwhelming and worthy of worship. The second beast performs signs, makes an image of the beast to be adored, and decrees that those who do not worship the beast will be killed. This second beast represents the priests and government officials who promote and enforce worship of the emperor. Everyone must have the mark of the beast on them, a sign of their servitude to the beast.

- Opposite the beast is the lamb, representing Christ. The lamb has his own followers, 144,000 men who have been redeemed from the entire earth. They have not defiled themselves with women, the author says; they are virgins. Note that the vision surely does not mean that only 144,000 male virgins will be saved. Rather, the number is a multiple of 12, the number of the tribes of Israel, and thus represents the complete fullness of those who are to be saved.

- In contrast to those marked with the name or number of the beast, the 144,000 faithful are marked with the names of the lamb and his Father on their foreheads. They, too, are slaves, but slaves of God and Christ, marked in baptism when they were sealed with oil. At the beginning of

Revelation, John calls himself Christ's slave. Later in the book, Jesus refers to his followers as his slaves. In Revelation, all people are enslaved, either to Satan and his beast, the Roman Empire, or to God and his lamb, Jesus.

- The demonization of Rome continues and reaches something of a climax in chapters 17 and 18. Here, we meet the great whore Babylon and witness her fall. The description of the great whore in chapter 17 leaves no doubt that she is another representation of Rome. The whore sits on the beast from chapter 13, and she's drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs for Jesus. The seven heads of the beast on which she sits are seven mountains, a reference to the seven hills of the city of Rome.

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- Rome may look strong, but her time is limited, as we are told in Revelation 17:17: "God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled." God will bring the reign of the great whore to an end, and that's what John sees in chapter 18. An angel comes down and announces, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!"

- We then discover who mourns the fall of Rome. We read that "the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning." These are the political rulers who have cooperated with Rome. But they are not the only mourners. Also weeping are the merchants of the earth, the

shipmasters and sailors, and all those whose trade is on the sea. In John's view, even participation in the trade that Rome enables is fornication with the whore Babylon.

- The view of Rome in Revelation is unrelentingly negative. The emperors are vile, satanic beasts, and even participation in Rome's international trade is idolatrous fornication. This view contrasts sharply with what we find in some other works of the New Testament. In Romans, chapter 13, Paul tells Christians that the governing authorities have been instituted by God as his servants to punish those who do wrong. Christians should respect the government and pay their taxes.

- The author of Luke and Acts portrays Roman officials as basically benign figures. Christians are good citizens, and they run afoul of the government thanks only to the plots of the Jews or when they get caught up in the complexities of the legal system. Pilate even proclaimed Jesus innocent of any seditious activity. The author of 1 Peter exhorts Christians to "honor the emperor" and to "accept the authority of every human institution." Revelation takes a different path.

The New Jerusalem

- The final chapters of Revelation present a vision of the future that will replace Rome, the new reality that God will unveil. It's not a heaven of fields and meadows somewhere in the sky; it's a perfect city, with streets of pure gold. The events leading up to the arrival of that city are found in chapter 20, in one of the most influential and widely discussed passages in the New Testament. Its teachings are unique to Revelation; although it draws on imagery from earlier texts, it is something new.

- After a cosmic battle, an angel seizes Satan the dragon and confines him to a locked pit for 1,000 years. At this point, all those who suffered martyrdom for Christ are raised from the dead in what's called the first resurrection. These resurrected saints reign with Christ for 1,000 years. Afterward, Satan is released from his prison for one final battle. Fire from heaven destroys the forces of evil, and Satan is cast into the lake of fire for eternal torment. There he joins the beast of Rome and the beast of the Roman priests and officials.

- What follows is a second, general resurrection of the dead. Books are opened, and everyone is judged according to their works as recorded in the books. Those who have done wickedness are cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. This terminology became standard in ancient and medieval Christianity: The first death is the death of the body, which all human beings must suffer. The second death is consignment to everlasting torture in the lake of fire at the last judgment, a fate suffered only by the damned.

- All these events lead to the arrival of a new Jerusalem in chapter 21. The city descends from heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband. It's a perfect city, constructed of gold and jewels. It needs no temple because God is simply present in it. Its gates are always open, and people will be streaming into it. Within it lies the tree of life, available to all the righteous. This is Revelation's concluding vision: a gleaming, prosperous city, open to all God's faithful.

Suggested Reading

Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis.*
Pagels, *Revelations.*
Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation.*

THE QUEST FOR UNITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Historical study of the diverse writings of the New Testament provides compelling explanations for the differences among them. But when Christians read the New Testament as a single book or as part of a bigger book, what do they do with this diversity? This question can itself be investigated historically. Not surprisingly, we'll find that Christians have approached the diversity of the New Testament in diverse ways.

The Rule of Truth

- Most Christians throughout history have not considered the diversity of views within the New Testament a problem. Many have encountered the New Testament only in short segments read in worship or in private devotion and thus have not often compared Matthew with John, for example, or 1 Peter with Revelation. If they have noticed differences or contradictions, they have assumed that somehow they must not really be contradictions, that there's some way that all the New Testament writings agree.

- As Christian leaders developed the idea of a New Testament in the late 2nd century, they were not unaware of the differences among the New Testament writings. Some clearly gave the matter careful thought. A great example is Irenaeus, who was the bishop of Lyon around the year 180. In his comments on New Testament writings, Irenaeus both embraced their diversity and tried to control or contain it.

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- Irenaeus was one of the first Christian writers to insist that Christians should use four gospels, no more and no fewer. He provided several justifications for this number. We can tell from how hard Irenaeus argues that most Christians in his day did not use four gospels. During the 100s, most Christian groups probably had just a single gospel. It was expensive to get books copied, and most Christians probably didn't see why they needed more than one account of Jesus's life and teaching.

- Irenaeus thought that Christians did need more than one, precisely because the gospels provide different perspectives on Jesus. He recognized that the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes how Jesus fulfilled the Jewish Law and did not want to abolish it, and he understood that the Gospel of John stresses the divinity of Jesus. Irenaeus worried that when Christians used only a single gospel, they, too, started to emphasize a single perspective on Jesus, and that could lead to false teaching—that is, to heresy.

- Diversity could only go so far, however, and Irenaeus worried a great deal about the diverse ways that Christians of his time interpreted the Bible. His literary masterpiece was a long book that listed and attacked various Christian teachers and groups that he called heretics. Irenaeus believed that heresies existed in part because people exploited contradictions among the books of the Bible. Plus, when people came across a puzzling or strange passage, they would interpret it without thinking about the wider message of Scripture.

- Irenaeus argued that the Bible as a whole, Old and New Testaments, may contain different books, but altogether they tell a sacred story, a plot about God and creation, which could be summarized in a short statement that he called the rule of truth. The rule of truth, Irenaeus claimed, was taught by the original disciples and had been passed down to the entire church throughout the world. If a passage in the Bible looks like it contradicts this rule, he maintained, it really does not.

- Irenaeus's rule of truth covers both the Old and New Testaments and ties them together into a single book. Irenaeus promoted what we can now see as an embryonic biblical canon, consisting of two parts, with the latter composed at least of the four gospels, the letters of Paul, and Revelation. The Bible, he said, contains two covenants. The two covenants came from the same God, who adjusted his revelation to the progression of humanity. The rule of truth provided the overall narrative of the one God's dealing with humanity and thus the basis for combining the Old and New Testaments into a single book, the Bible.

Gospel Harmony

- Around the same time as Irenaeus, a Christian scholar named Tatian read the four gospels and decided not to embrace their diversity. Instead, he used the four gospels to create a new single gospel, one that borrowed elements from each gospel and made a single text without any contradictions. This gospel became known as the *Diatessaron*, Greek for "out of four." Because Tatian's book eliminated the differences among the gospels, it has been called a gospel harmony.

- Unfortunately, Tatian's gospel survives only in fragments. Historians try to reconstruct most of it by studying later gospel harmonies that probably made use of Tatian's. When they do, they find that Tatian's *Diatessaron* emphasized the ascetic elements of Jesus's teaching—that Christians should fast, renounce wealth, and abstain from sex if they can.

- The *Diatessaron* became very popular among churches in Syria and Mesopotamia, which was where Tatian lived. Doubtless some of these Christians found the message of Tatian's gospel appealing, but probably many more appreciated the convenience of a single account of Jesus's life and teaching. Only in the 5th century was a very determined bishop, named Rabbula, able to get churches to stop using the *Diatessaron*.

- Tatian's gospel may be lost to us, but the spirit of his work has always lived on among Christians. Even today, Christian authors write books about Jesus that borrow from all the gospels and bring them into harmony. You especially find such books for children and young people. Likewise, contemporary movies about Jesus tend to mix together stories and teachings from all four gospels.

Allegorical Interpretation

- Most early Christian scholars used another method to handle the differences among New Testament writings, and especially the gospels: allegorical interpretation. The major pioneer of this approach was Origen, a Christian scholar from Alexandria in Egypt who later moved to Caesarea Maritima in Palestine. Origen lived in the 3rd century and died around 253.

- Origen took seriously the differences in how the gospels narrate the life of Jesus. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen paused when he came to Jesus driving people out of the Temple in chapter 2. He noticed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this incident at the end of Jesus's ministry, right before he was arrested, while John makes it one of the first things that Jesus does. He concluded that Matthew, Mark, and Luke gave the historical account and that John's account was historically false, but spiritually true.

- In Origen's view, the Holy Spirit inspired John to create a story that was historically false so that people would seek to understand the story's higher spiritual meaning. Origen offers several possible spiritual or allegorical meanings for the cleansing of the Temple in John. For example, the Temple may represent the human soul, which Jesus must cleanse of moral impurities before one can worship God rightly. By composing a story that the diligent reader would recognize as historically improbable, John encouraged the reader to look for the higher, allegorical meaning.

- Origen extended this principle to the rest of the New Testament and to the entire Bible. Paul, for example, makes what Origen calls contradictory statements about himself in his letters, and he sometimes acts in different ways at different times. Origen claims that Paul acted in different ways sometimes for pastoral reasons—trying to convert Gentiles in one

situation and Jews in another—but sometimes for symbolic reasons. His words are not to be taken literally, and if we understand that, we can resolve contradictions.

- Allegorical interpretation became a popular way for Christian scholars of the ancient and medieval church to embrace unity and diversity in the New Testament. This approach allowed them to acknowledge the diversity in the New Testament while resolving seeming contradictions and ultimately reduce diversity. Through allegory, an interpreter can make a passage that seems to violate a certain creed actually cohere with it.

Modern Approaches

- As time went on, traditional allegorical interpretation began to lose favor among biblical scholars. The Protestant reformers—like Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Calvin—argued that ordinary Christians should read the Bible in their own languages. The Bible's message, they said, is clear and accessible. It's not hidden in symbolic language that only a scholar can decode. You should stick to the plain sense of the text.

- But when reformers relied only on the plain sense, contradictions became more apparent. Luther, for example, noticed that while Paul insists that Christians are saved by faith alone, apart from works of the Law, James teaches that Christians must have both faith and works to be saved. Without allegorical interpretation that might interpret one of these texts symbolically, what should the Christian say?

- Luther argued that Scripture communicates an overall message, summed up as Law and Gospel. In passages that belong to Law, the Bible makes clear that God demands a righteous life of people, and that people can

never be as holy and perfect as God wants. In passages that belong to Gospel, the Bible reveals that God saves people by grace through their faith in Jesus Christ. Judged against what Luther called the Gospel, James falls short. Luther called it "an epistle of straw" and suggested it be removed from the New Testament.

- John Calvin had his own means of bringing unity to the Bible. He found within it a sacred story about God and his people, marked by a series of covenants that climax in the work of Jesus Christ. The Bible shows how, even when people go astray, God has a predetermined plan that leads to salvation for the people whom God has chosen. Trained in law and rhetoric, Calvin looked for how individual books and passages in the Bible contributed to this larger story.

- Meanwhile, the critical historical study of the Bible began to arise. Historians emphasized the specific historical origins of each book, questioned whether individual books were written by the traditionally named authors, and explained how each writer responded to his own historical context. This raised even more questions for thoughtful Christians.

- Luther himself engaged in some critical historical analysis of the New Testament, concluding that the Letter of Jude was not written by an apostle. The author, he says, clearly copied from 2 Peter—today we think it's the opposite, in fact—and speaks of the apostles as belonging to the distant past. And from what we know about the historical Jude, he probably could not write in Greek. Therefore, Luther argued, this letter is probably not by an apostle and should not serve as what he called a foundation for the faith.

- Luther's concept of a foundation for the faith hints at probably the dominant way of dealing with the diversity of the New Testament in the modern period, a strategy that's often called a canon within the canon. Different Christians place certain parts of the New Testament

canon at the center of their theology, as the foundation for the faith, as a canon within the canon. Other parts of the New Testament then play a subordinate role, and when they differ from the canon within the canon, they might be discounted altogether.

- For Luther and most modern theologians, the canon within the canon has usually been the four gospels and the letters of Paul. This makes sense, because the gospels and Paul formed the earliest nucleus of the New Testament. They're what Irenaeus emphasized in the late 100s, and the other books were added to them over the subsequent centuries. By this approach, if James seems to contradict Paul, then you go with Paul.

- Especially in the 20th century, the canons within the canon of various Christians tended to be ideas, like Luther's Law and Gospel, rather than specific books of the Bible. Some Christians have turned away from a literal approach to the Bible. These Christians can, somewhat like Luther and Calvin, look for an overall message by which they assess whether they should follow particular passages.

- More conservative Christians reject this approach, insisting that every part of the Bible is equally divinely inspired and therefore authoritative for the Christian. But even they must develop ways to create a unified message from diverse biblical books. Many, therefore, pursue the kind of allegorical interpretation that earlier Christians practiced; that is, they harmonize the Bible by interpreting some passages less literally than others.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, "Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity."
Gamble, *The New Testament Canon.*
Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation.*
Stendahl, *Meanings*.

QUIZ

1. The contents of the New Testament as we know it today were first defined in which time period?
- **a.** The 100s AD
- **b.** The 200s AD
- **c.** The 300s AD
- **d.** The 400s AD

2. What does apocalyptic eschatology refer to?
- **a.** Jewish discourse about the nature of God
- **b.** Revealed discourse about the end of the world as we know it
- **c.** Philosophical discussion of religious ethics
- **d.** Symbolic interpretation of the New Testament

3. When Paul argued that people are made righteous by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law, what did he mean?
- **a.** Gentile believers in Jesus need not get circumcised and follow Jewish Law to be saved.
- **b.** Jewish believers in Jesus must give up their traditions to be saved.
- **c.** People need not behave righteously to be saved.
- **d.** God had revoked his promises to the Jews.

4. Why do historians call leadership in Paul's congregations charismatic?
- **a.** Only inspiring speakers were allowed to be leaders.
- **b.** Leadership positions were decided by popular vote.
- **c.** Only freeborn men could lead.
- **d.** Leadership roles were considered gifts of the Holy Spirit.

5. What does Paul argue in 1 Corinthians regarding women who pray and prophesy in church meetings?
a. They should wear something on their heads.
b. They must be unmarried, as he is.
c. They should allow men to pray and prophesy first.
d. They should stop doing so.

6. Who is the only human character in the Gospel of Mark to identify Jesus as the Son of God?
a. An anonymous woman who anoints Jesus
b. The Apostle Peter
c. A Roman centurion
d. His mother, Mary

7. Most biblical scholars have concluded that when the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote his gospel, he used which of the following?
a. The Gospel of Mark
b. A lost collection of Jesus's sayings referred to as Q
c. The Gospel of Luke
d. Both A and B

8. After which character in the Old Testament does Matthew most fully model Jesus?
a. Abraham
b. Moses
c. David
d. Daniel

9. According to the author of Luke and Acts, wealthy Christians should do which of the following?
- **a.** Give their wealth to the poor
- **b.** Despair because they cannot be saved
- **c.** Serve as the church's primary leaders
- **d.** Work to overthrow the Roman political system

10. According to the author of Luke and Acts, why did the disciples not understand Jesus's identity and mission during his lifetime?
- **a.** They refused to acknowledge that Jesus must suffer and die.
- **b.** Jesus never said anything about these things.
- **c.** This knowledge was hidden from them until after the resurrection.
- **d.** This is a trick question: The disciples always understand such things in Luke and Acts.

11. Which of the following ideas do scholars call realized eschatology in the Gospel of John?
- **a.** Final things, like the resurrection and judgment, have already become real for the believer.
- **b.** Believers realize the truth about Jesus only at the end of the world.
- **c.** The Johannine Christians were expelled from a synagogue.
- **d.** The Word became flesh.

12. 1 John was written to oppose Christians who probably believed which of the following ideas?
- **a.** Sins that Christians commit after baptism cannot be forgiven.
- **b.** The Gospel of John contained serious errors.
- **c.** Christians should grant hospitality to everyone.

d. Jesus was not a flesh-and-blood human being, but only seemed to be so.

13. What is one reason that historians conclude that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist?
a. All Jews at the time were so baptized.
b. Early Christians found this fact problematic.
c. The Gospel accounts are always historically accurate.
d. Jesus was sinful and needed to repent.

14. What did the author of James mean when he argued that people are saved by both faith and works?
a. Gentiles need not get circumcised and follow the Jewish Law to be saved.
b. Jewish believers in Jesus should give up their traditions.
c. To be saved, people must not only say that they believe in God but also demonstrate their faith in action.
d. Rich people are beyond salvation.

15. According to the Revelation to John, which of the following ideas is true of the Roman Empire?
a. It was led by an emperor whom Christians should honor.
b. It had been established by God to punish evildoers and reward good people.
c. It was insignificant to the lives of Christians.
d. It was a demonic beast that God would destroy.

ANSWERS
1 C, 2 B, 3 A, 4 D, 5 A, 6 C, 7 D, 8 B, 9 A, 10 C, 11 A, 12 D,
13 B, 14 C, 15 D

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